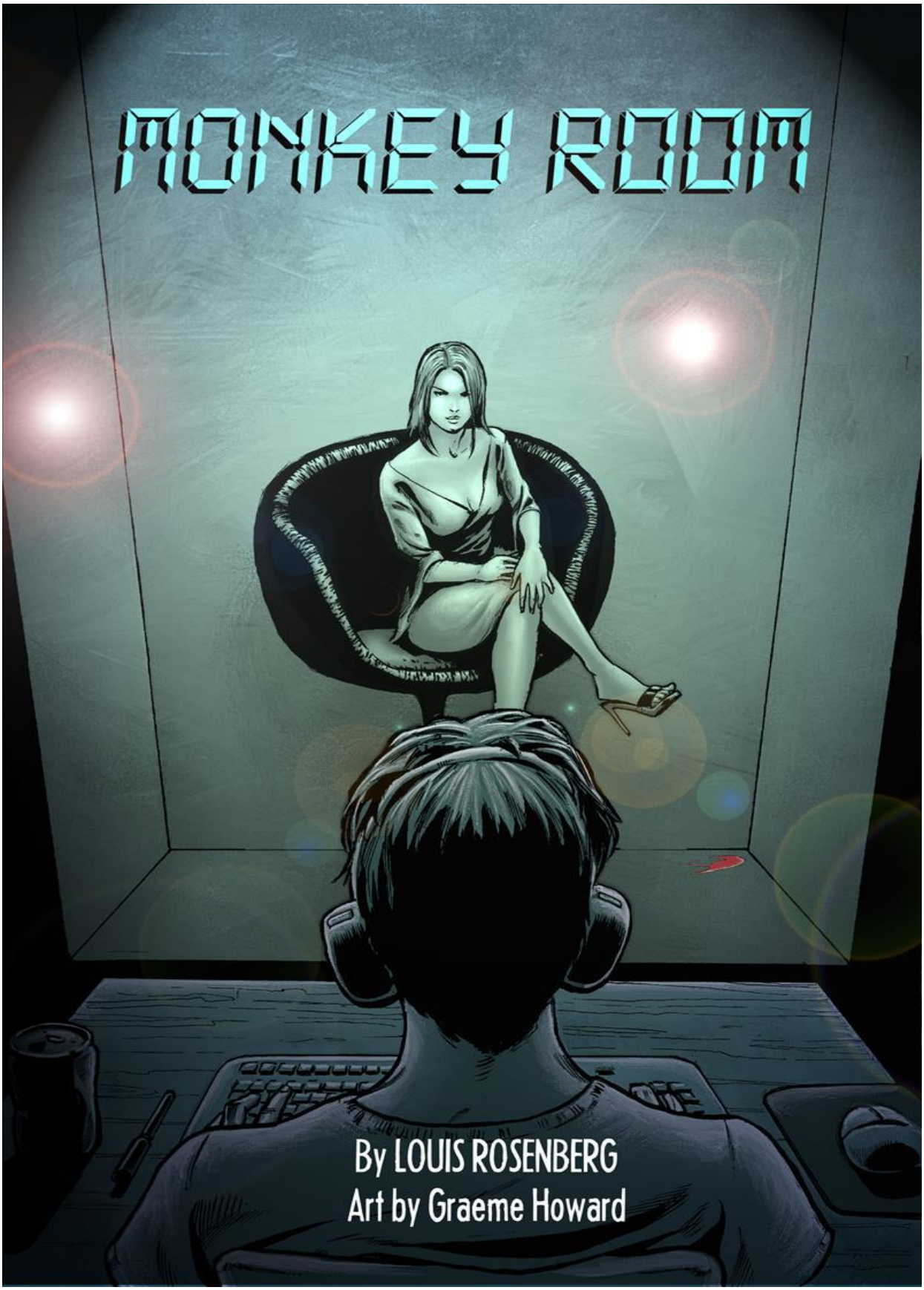
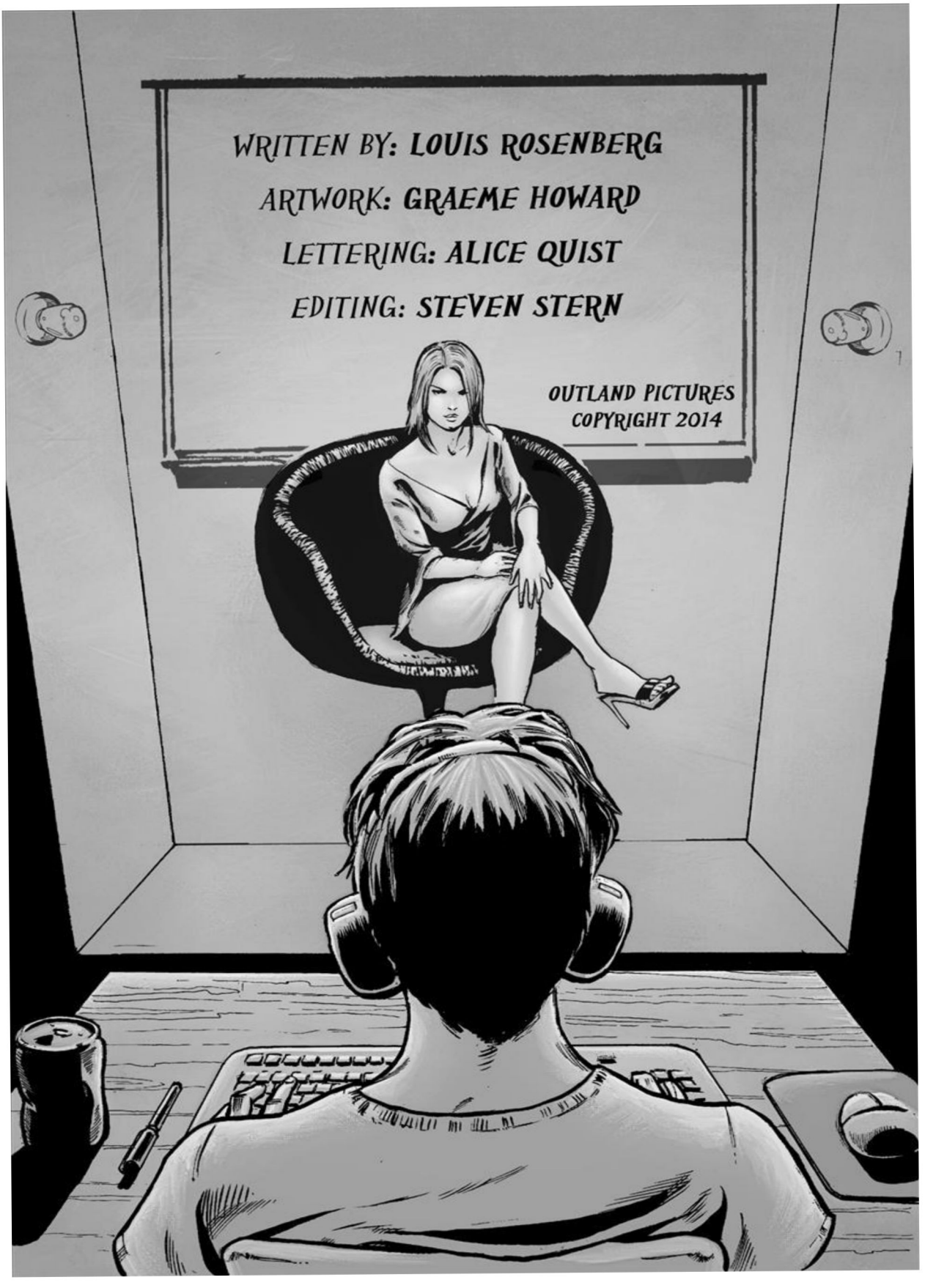

MONKEY ROOM
By LOUIS ROSENBERG
Art by Graeme Howard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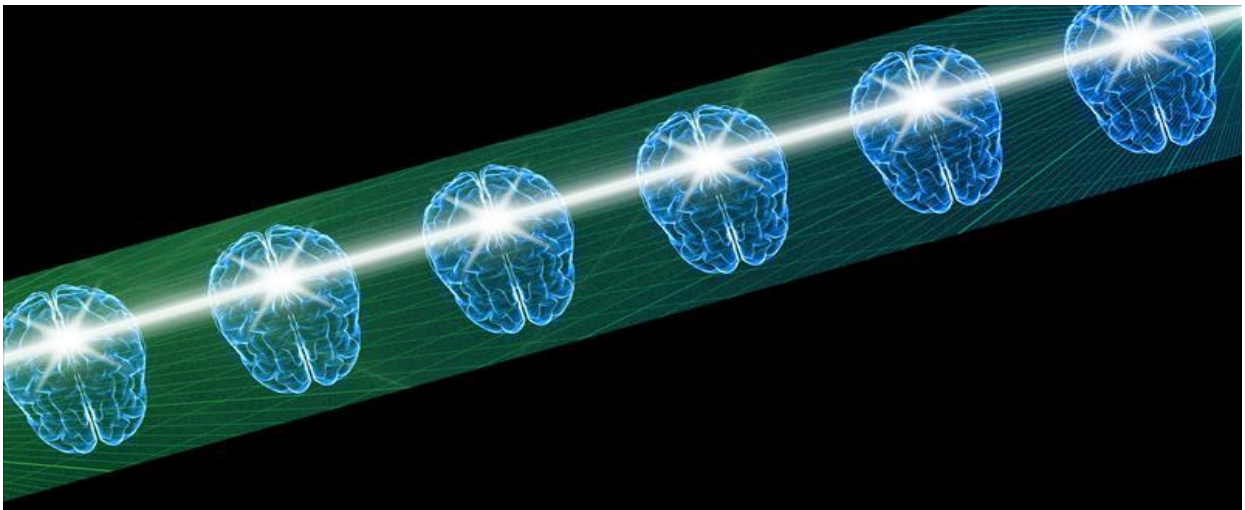

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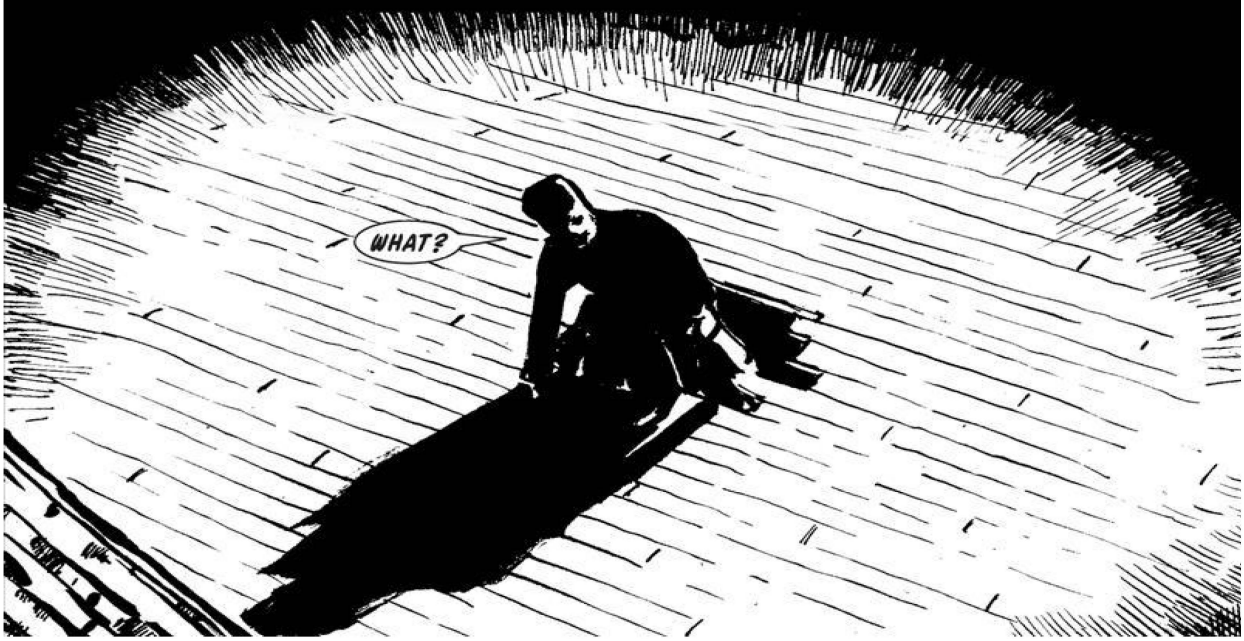
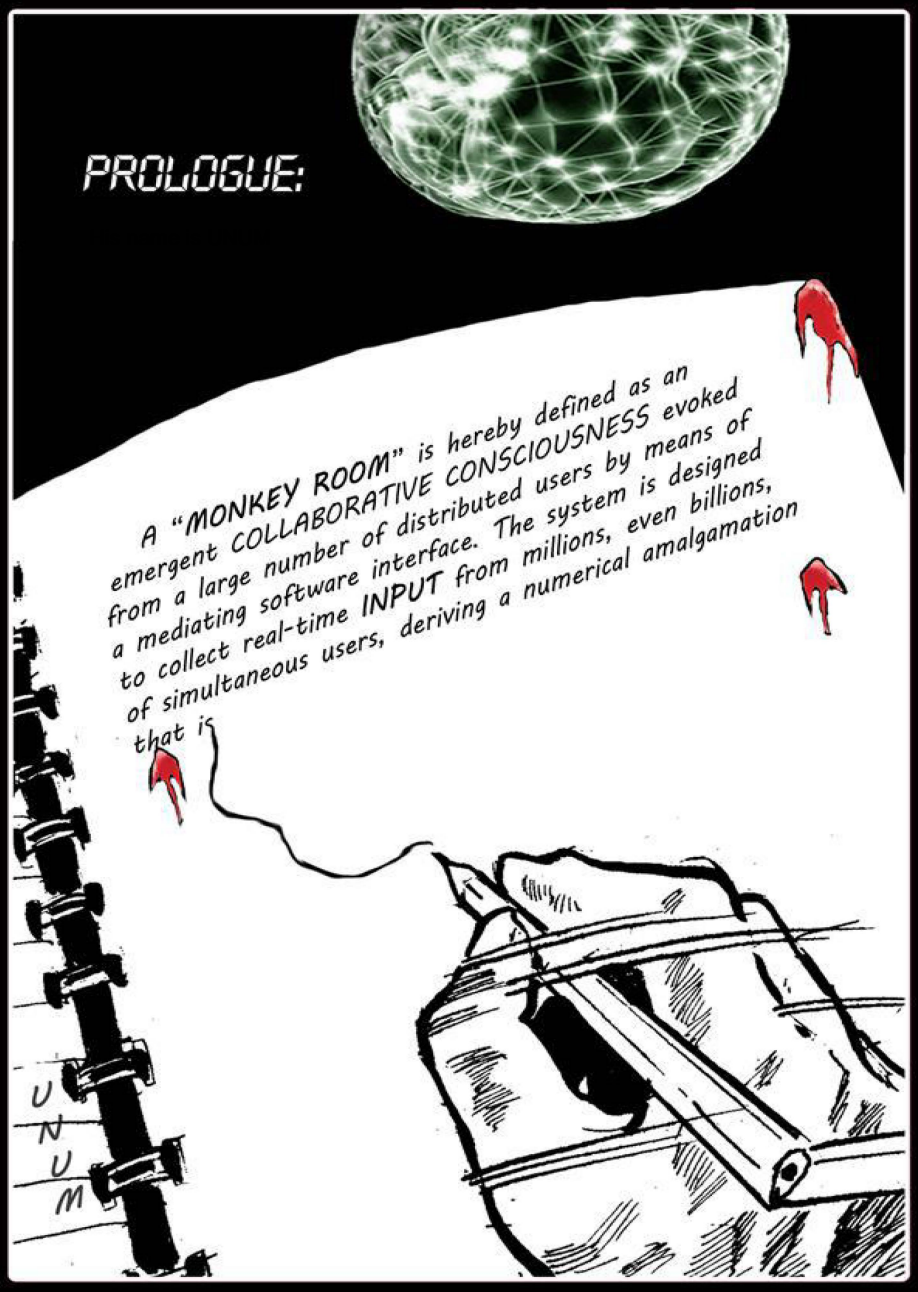
THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO SHERSTIN, BEN, ZOE, MOM, AND DAD.
THANKS TO THE MANY PEOPLE WHO HELPED PUSH THIS FORWARD.

SPECIAL THANKS TO *MICHAEL VANDENBERG* FOR THE SLICK *PIGEON ART*

MONKEY ROOM

PARENTAL
ADVISORY
MATURE CONTENT




PROLOGUE:
A "MONKEY ROOM" is hereby defined as an emergent COLLABORATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS evoked from a large number of distributed users by means of a mediating software interface. The system is designed to collect real-time INPUT from millions, even billions, of simultaneous users, deriving a numerical amalgamation that is
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PART ONE

Meet Joshua Ketterman...

11:08 PM

A large CRACK splits the plaster on the ceiling. It's no big deal, for it matches the many cracks on the walls. Directly below lies Joshua Ketterman on the bare mattress of a cheap twin bed, his eyes wide. He's only 30 years old and yet he wears the beaten look of a man who has endured three full lifetimes worth of defeats and expects to rack up a few more.

Yes Joshua Ketterman is the PERFECT tenant for this crappy little apartment, in this rundown little building, in this seedy part of San Francisco. He doesn't mind the peeling paint, or the rusty pipes, or the fact that most of the floorboards are buckled. In fact, he hasn't even noticed....

And I should know, for Joshua Ketterman is me.

12:55 AM
SOMETIMES I WONDER HOW I GOT HERE...
NOT TO THIS PLACE, TO THIS PERSON.
I MEAN REALLY, WHAT THE FUCK?
THIS ISN'T WHO I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE...
THIS ISN'T WHAT I WAS SUPPOSED TO DO...
FORGET ALL THAT. THIS IS A NEW LIFE...
Bric à Brac

A NEW BEGINNING...
OPALS
RKET
THINGS ARE GOING TO BE DIFFERENT HERE...
BETTER HERE...
I'M SURE OF IT.
NO CALLS

NO TEXTS
NO EMAILS
NO FRIENDS
NO LIFE

7:42 AM

Before I head out, I should tell you a bit about this place. I live on the 2ND FLOOR directly above OPAL'S MARKET - a local grocery run by an elderly Japanese couple, Opal and Oscar. They seem nice. And their store is well stocked.

I moved in three days ago.

I haven't met any of the other TENANTS yet, but I hear them coming and going, always at unusual hours. I also hear STRANGE NOISES from the apartment above me, like someone is pacing the floor in the middle of the night. It has me a little spooked...

THE BALD GUY NEXT-DOOR IS VERGE. WE HAVEN'T SPOKEN YET, BUT I CAN TELL HE'S AN ARROGANT PRICK...
AFTER YOU, MON CHERI...
GiiiGGLE
SLAP
SLAM
1
2
WHY THE LIGHT OVER HIS DOOR?
WEIRD...
AND THEN THERE'S THE HIPPIE NUT-JOB...
2nd
S-T-I-M...

STIMULUS!
HUH?
REACTION...
WHAT THE HELL, MAN?
2nd FL
OPALS
FREAK...
AND FINALLY, THERE'S OPAL DOWNSTAIRS...
HAPPY MORNING, MR. JOSHUA. HOW YOU BE FEELING TODAY?
ME? OH...GETTING SETTLED.
IT HARD MOVE NEW PLACE. NEED MEET NEW PEOPLE... MAKE NEW FRIENDS. UNTIL THEN, LIFE NOT FEEL SO REAL.

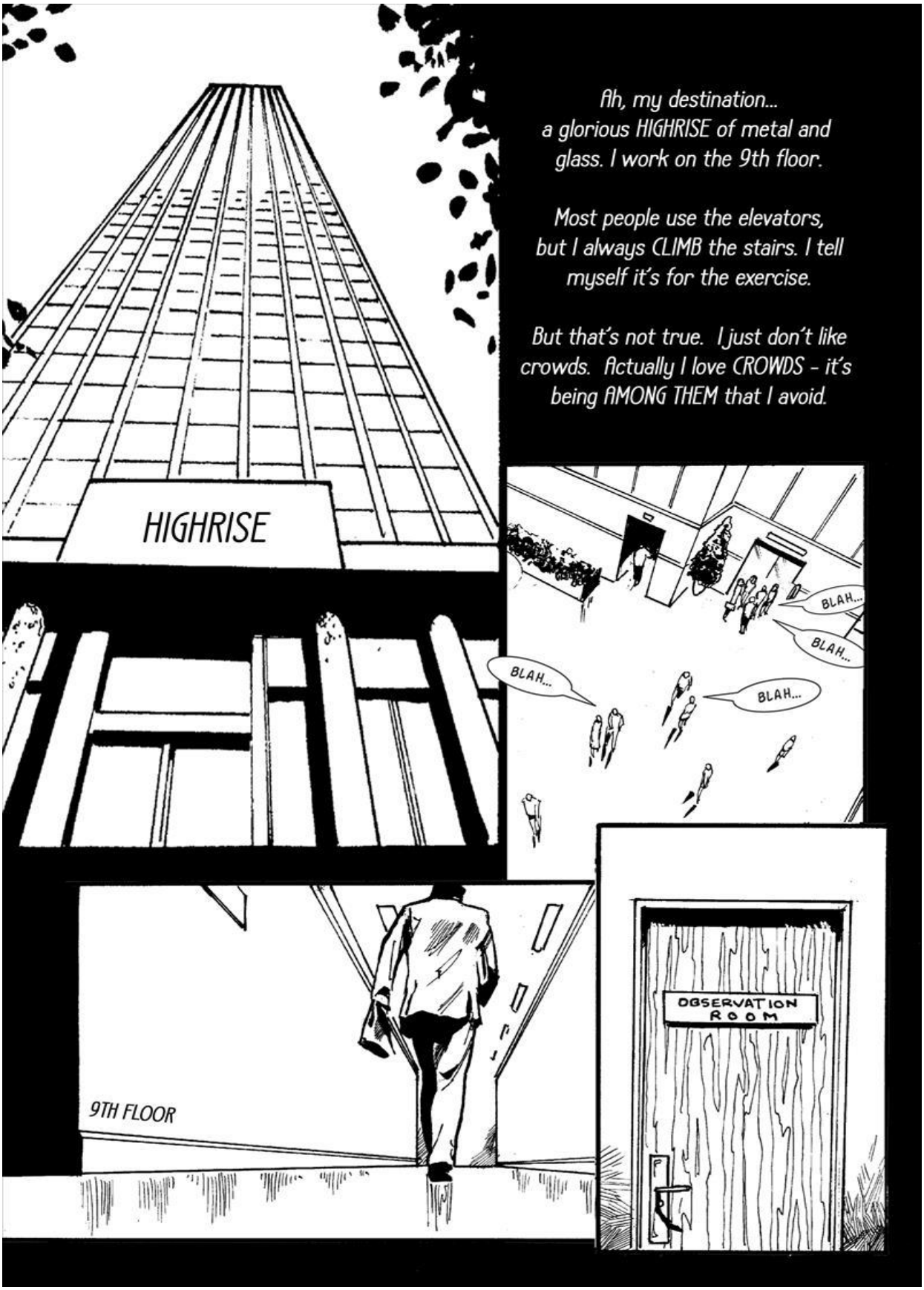
THAT'S SO TRUE...
SO...WHAT I GET YOU TODAY?
A BAGEL, TOASTED, AND A COFFEE.
YOU NO WORRY, MR JOSHUA, THINGS BE LOOKING UP FOR YOU. I CAN FEEL IT...
YOU REALLY THINK?
I KNOW.

And off to work I go...

So many BUSY PEOPLE rushing all around... with places to BE and things to DO.

It makes me feel invisible.

I'm not the only one...
EVIL BEGETS EVIL! SIN BEGETS SIN!
I'M NOT INVISABLE I'M HOMELESS


Ah, my destination...
a glorious HIGHRISE of metal and glass. I work on the 9th floor.
Most people use the elevators, but I always CLIMB the stairs. I tell myself it's for the exercise.
But that's not true. I just don't like crowds. Actually I love CROWDS - it's being AMONG THEM that I avoid.
HIGHRISE
BLAH...
BLAH...
BLAH...
BLAH...
9TH FLOOR
OBSERVATION ROOM

8:56 AM

It's a TINY ROOM... the size of a walk-in closet.

And yet it's the only place I truly FEEL ALIVE.

I HAD A COLLEGE PROFESSOR WHO OFTEN QUOTED THE MILLION MONKEY SCENARIO…
HE SAID-- IF YOU PUT A MILLION MONKEYS IN A ROOM…
…WITH A MILLION COMPUTERS, AND LET THEM POUND THE KEYS FOR MILLIONS AND MILLIONS OF YEARS…
…THEY'D EVENTUALLY PRODUCE THE COMPLETE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE BY DUMB LUCK.
Steve
Fred
Dave
I SAY HE WASN'T GIVING THE MONKEYS ENOUGH CREDIT…

And I should know...

...they're my MONKEYS.

THIS IS MY FIRST TIME...
Steve
8:59 AM
Steve
Fred
Dave
CONFIDENT
ME, TOO.
Fred
9:00 AM
GREETINGS AND SALUTATIONS! I'M BILLIE. I'LL BE THE MODERATOR FOR TODAY'S SESSION.
Billy
CONFIDENT
ANXIOUS
INSECURE
Steve
Fred
Dave
Mark
Bill
I WANT TO THANK YOU ALL FOR COMING IN.
YOUR INPUT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO US. BUT REMEMBER, WE DON'T WANT YOU TO THINK TOO HARD. WE WANT TO GET AT YOUR GUT REACTIONS, YOUR RAW INSTINCTS. UNDERSTAND?
TERRIFIC, LET'S GET STARTED...
WHO CAN TELL ME WHAT THIS IS?
LOOKS LIKE MOUTHWASH TO ME.
ME TOO...
PRODUCT X

VERY GOOD, BUT IT'S MORE THAN JUST MOUTHWASH, IT'S EXTREME MOUTHWASH...
WITH TRIPLE THE ALCOHOL CONTENT, PLUS SOLUBLE CAFFEINE TO MAKE YOUR GUMS TINGLE, THIS, MY FRIENDS... WILL TAKE ORAL HYGIENE TO A WHOLE NEW LEVEL!
PRODUCT X
SO, WHAT'RE YOU GONNA CALL THAT STUFF?
THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT WE'RE HERE TO FIGURE OUT.
CONFIDENT
ANXIOUS
INSECURE
FREQUENT
CURIOUS
BLAH, BLAH, BLAH...
BLAH, BLAH, BLAH...
BLAH, BLAH, BLAH...
TALK, TALK, TALK...
BLAH, BLAH, BLAH...
BLAH, BLAH, BLAH...
HOCUS FOCUS
A MARKETING RESEARCH

I know you THINK this job is easy....

But it's not.

At least not the way I do it... paying attention to every NOD and FROWN, every SMILE and HUFF, every raised eyebrow and tilted shoulder. It's all there for the taking - the HINTS and CLUES and revelations.

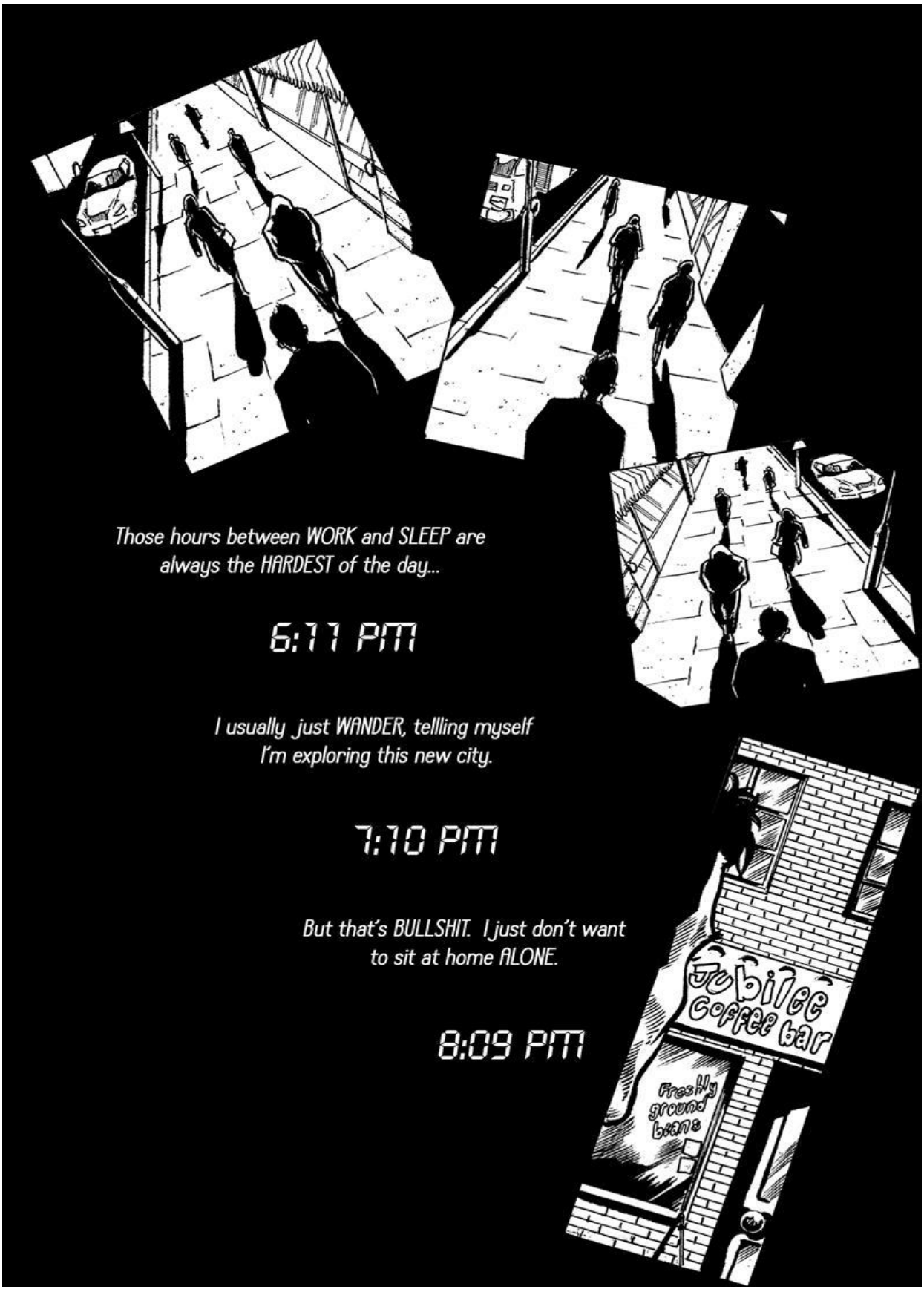
It's all there.

It's all there...
TO ME, IT'S NOT JUST FRESH...IT'S SUPER-FRESH!
IT'S ULTRA-FRESH. MEGA-FRESH.
ROCK
HYPER-FRESH. NO...HYPER-CLEAN!
KEEP IT GOING, FOLKS...
Steve
Fresh
Dave
Rod
SLAM
BUT IT'S MORE THAN JUST CLEAN, IT'S SCIENTIFIC, LIKE FROM A LAB.
I AGREE, AND PEOPLE LIKE SCIENTIFIC, THEY RESPECT IT. WE NEED THAT.
I'VE GOT IT, HOW ABOUT..... ACID CLEAN!
THAT'S PERFECT!
AND...
...RIGHT AGAIN!
ACID CLEAN
Steve
Rod
Fred

5:02 PM

Down the stairs...

...and into the wild.


Those hours between WORK and SLEEP are always the HARDEST of the day...
6:11 PM
I usually just WANDER, tellling myself I'm exploring this new city.
7:10 PM
But that's BULLSHIT. I just don't want to sit at home ALONE.
8:09 PM
Jubilee Coffee bar
Freshly ground beans

A WISE MAN ONCE SAID, 'GOD DOESN'T PLAY DICE', BUT WHAT HAPPENED NEXT MAY PROVE OTHERWISE...
Espress
Au Lai
THIS SEAT TAKEN?
HUH? NO...IT'S JUST ME.
GOOD. I'M GWEN...
GO AHEAD.. FASCINATE ME.
Espresso Au Lait
FASCINATE YOU...HOW?
ICE WATER, HEAVY ON THE ICE.
YES, MA'AM...
I'M A STRANGER. YOU CAN TELL ME ANYTHING. SURPRISE ME. SHOCK ME.
I...UHM... I DON'T KNOW.
COME ON...THE WAY YOU WERE STARING OUT THAT WINDOW, YOU GOTTA HAVE SOMETHING. EVERYONE HAS SOMETHING!

OKAY, WELL... YOU SEE THAT COUPLE SITTING OVER THERE. I HEARD THEM TALKING, AND I'M WILLING TO BET--
NO, NOT THEM..... YOU.
OKAY. HMMMM. LET ME THINK...
WHAT ABOUT DREAMS? HAD ANY INTERESTING DREAMS LATELY?
YOU HAVE... I CAN SEE ON YOUR FACE.
WELL...
THE TRUTH IS...I'VE BEEN HAVING THIS SAME CRAZY DREAM, EVERY NIGHT FOR WEEKS.

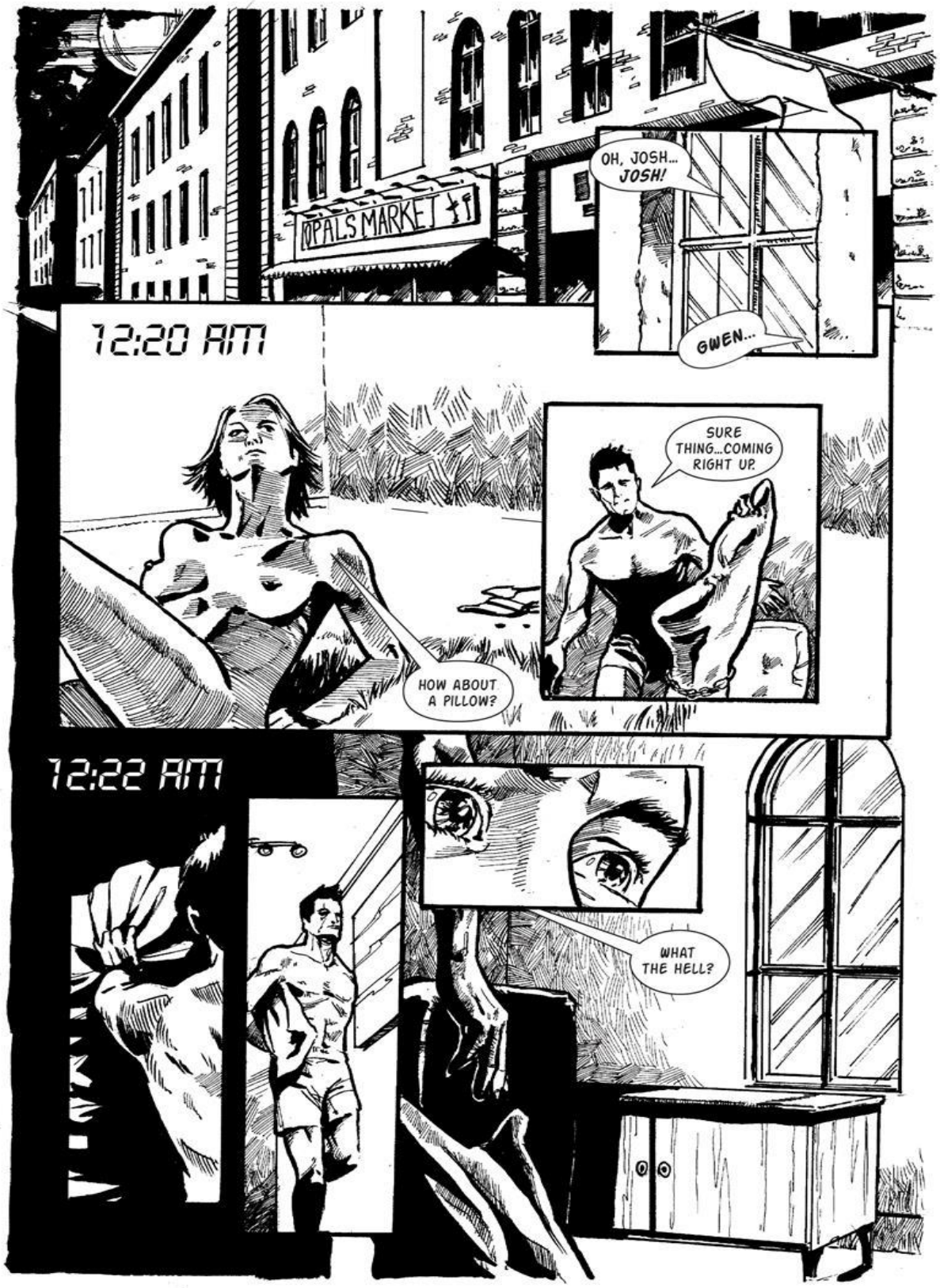
PERFECT! SPILL IT...
OKAY, WELL... IT ALWAYS STARTS THE SAME, WITH ME IN A BIG EMPTY ROOM, JUST LYING THERE, FLAT ON MY BACK.
IT'S NOT A SCARY PLACE, JUST BIG AND EMPTY, BUT STILL I FEEL ANXIOUS, LIKE THERE'S SOMETHING I'M SUPPOSED TO DO, SOMETHING IMPORTANT...
THE PROBLEM IS, I CAN'T GET UP. I TRY AND TRY, BUT CAN'T.
SO...YOU'RE PARALYZED?
NO, NOT PARALYZED...PINNED DOWN, LIKE THERE'S 1000 POUNDS OF SAND ON ME THAT I JUST CAN'T PUSH THROUGH.
FASCINATING...
ALL I CAN DO IS LAY THERE AND LOOK AROUND, AND, WHEN I DO... I SEE FACES--LOTS OF THEM, STARING DOWN AT ME, ALL GRIM AND SERIOUS, LIKE THEY THINK I'M GONNA DIE OR SOMETHING.
PRETTY SILLY, HUH?
NOT AT ALL...
Espresso Au Lait
ground beans

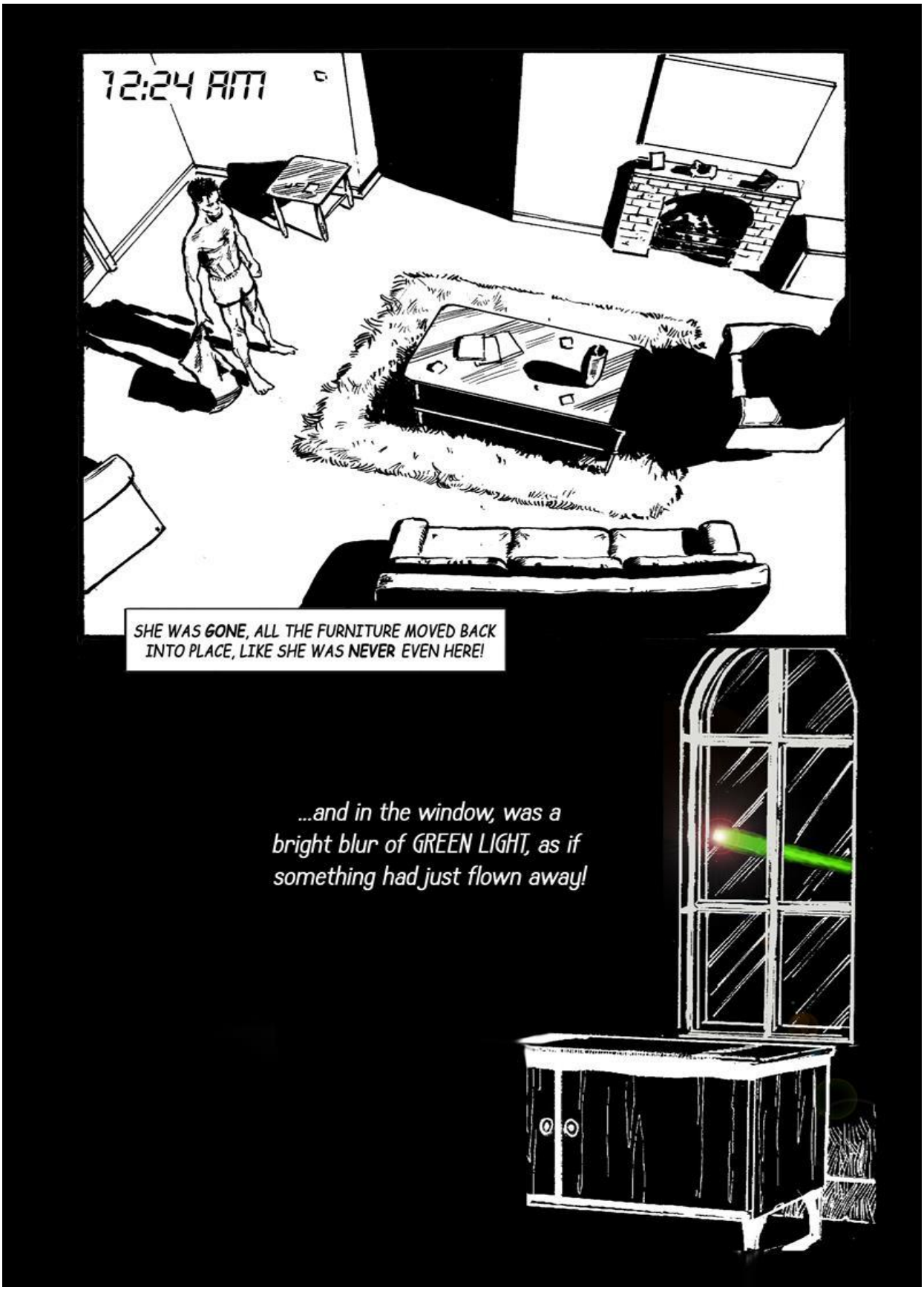
THE DREAM IS TELLING YOU SOMETHING. THE ONLY QUESTION IS--
I KNOW YOU CAN SEE ME! I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME!
TAP
TAP
TAP
I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE UP TO!
JUST IGNORE HIM AND HE'LL GO AWAY.
EVIL BEGETS EVIL! SIN BEGETS SIN!
IGNORE WHO?
SO THERE YOU WERE...PINNED TO THE FLOOR, BUT FEELING LIKE YOU HAVE BIG THINGS TO DO, IMPORTANT THINGS. IT'S OBVIOUS!
THERE'S SOMETHING HOLDING YOU BACK, DEEP DOWN INSIDE, BUT YOU'RE AVOIDING IT.
YOU REALLY THINK?
OH SHIT. TIME'S UP. I GOTTA GO.
WAIT...CAN I GET YOUR NUMBER?

MY NUMBER... WHY?
WHY? WELL... SO I CAN CALL YOU SOMETIME.
MAYBE TO GO TO DINNER. MAYBE FRIDAY NIGHT?
I DON'T KNOW...FRIDAY MIGHT BE GOOD, BUT FIRST, LET'S SEE HOW THINGS GO TONIGHT.
TONIGHT?
10:55 PM
IT'S JUST ON THE NEXT CORNER... I MOVED IN LAST WEEK.
RELAX... I DON'T BITE.
11:05 PM
NICE PLACE.
IS THIS YOU? YOUR FOLKS?
YEAH... AT MY COLLEGE GRADUATION.

COLLEGE! YOU LOOK 12 YEARS OLD?
I WAS 14.
YOU GRADUATED COLLEGE AT 14?
I GUESS I WAS A SMART KID.
YOU GUESS?
I COLLECT THEM. THEY'RE ANTIQUES. EARLY 1900'S.
EVERYONE KNOWS THEY PUT COCAINE IN COCA-COLA WAY BACK WHEN...BUT WHAT ABOUT 7UP? BELIEVE IT OR NOT, WHAT GOT PEOPLE HOOKED WAS--
LITHIUM, THE FIRST ANTI-DEPRESSANT.
AND THEIR TIMING WAS PERFECT.
THE DRINK CAME OUT IN 1929, JUST WEEKS BEFORE THE GREAT DEPRESSION HIT.
HOW...HOW'D YOU KNOW THAT?
JUST SMART, I GUESS...

DON'T JUST STAND THERE, HELP ME MOVE THIS CHAIR.
WHAT? WHY?
BECAUSE WE'RE GONNA NEED SOME ROOM...
THIS YOURS?
SORRY...


PAL'S MARKET
OH, JOSH... JOSH!
GWEN...
12:20 AM
SURE THING...COMING RIGHT UP.
HOW ABOUT A PILLOW?
12:22 AM
WHAT THE HELL?


12:24 AM
SHE WAS GONE, ALL THE FURNITURE MOVED BACK INTO PLACE, LIKE SHE WAS NEVER EVEN HERE!
...and in the window, was a bright blur of GREEN LIGHT, as if something had just flown away!

1:32 AM

SOMETIMES I WONDER HOW I GOT HERE...
NOT TO THIS PLACE, TO THIS PERSON.

1:33 AM

1:34 AM

1:35 AM

7:36 AM
IT ALWAYS STARTS THE SAME, WITH ME IN A BIG EMPTY ROOM, JUST LYING THERE, FLAT ON MY BACK...UNABLE TO GET UP.
THEN COME THE FACES...
LOTS OF THEM, STARING DOWN AT ME, ALL GRIM AND SERIOUS...
JUST LEAVE ME ALONE!
A FAMILIAR PLACE FROM LONG AGO...
AND SUDDENLY, I'M IN A DIFFERENT PLACE.

I KNOW THIS IS SCARY, JOSH...A NEW SCHOOL, WITH NEW KIDS, OLDER THAN YOU, BUT WE CAN'T HOLD YOU BACK. YOU WERE MEANT TO DO GREAT THINGS...BIG THINGS!
TRUST ME, WHEN YOU GROW UP AND ACHIEVE YOUR GREATNESS, YOUR VERY OWN MONA LISA, YOU'LL LOOK BACK ON THIS AND THANK YOUR MOM AND I FOR SENDING YOU. YOU WILL...
2:22 AM
BIG THINGS...
WHAT'S THAT?
GWEN...
6:32 AM
6:55 AM

And off to work I go...

...my head swirling with GWEN.

She must be playing some kind of GAME,
to see if I'll track her down.

Why else would she leave her ANKLET
in a place so easy to find?

I know, I know... it could have been an ACCIDENT.

But GWEN..... she dosn't seem like she does ANYTHING by accident.

SOON I WAS BACK IN MY LITTLE ROOM, BACK AT MY LITTLE DESK, A FRESH TRIBE OF MONKEYS BEFORE ME...
IT'S MY FIRST TIME TOO, BUT I'VE ALWAYS BEEN CURIOUS ABOUT THESE THINGS.
TOTALLY...
Kyle
Scott
George
Bob
Joe
GREETINGS. I WANT TO THANK YOU ALL FOR COMING IN TODAY. YOUR INPUT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO US.
EVERYONE READY TO GET FOCUSED?
GEORGE
9:07 AM
OKAY FOLKS, LET'S JUMP RIGHT IN. WHO CAN TELL US WHAT THIS IS?
LOOKS LIKE DIAPERS TO ME.

CORRECT, ALTHOUGH OUR CLIENT FEELS THAT NAME INHIBITS SALES.
THEY SAY "PROTECTIVE UNDERGARMENTS" INSTEAD.
WOULD THAT MAKE YOU FOLKS MORE COMFORTABLE BUYING THEM?
NO WAY...PROTECTIVE UNDERGARMENTS SOUNDS LIKE IT'S FOR LITTLE OLD MEN WHO NEED HELP PUTTING THEM ON.
TOTALLY-- IT'S LIKE THEY'RE TRYING TOO HARD NOT TO CALL THEM DIAPERS.
I THINK THE WORD "UNDERGARMENT" IS THE PROBLEM. NO GUY WANTS TO BUY AN UNDERGARMENT...IT'S NOT MANLY.
YOU GOT THAT RIGHT.
DAMN RIGHT.
KEEP IT GOING, FOLKS...
WHAT ABOUT YOU, GEORGE? ANY THOUGHTS?
WHO ME?
Kyle: Assertive
Scott: Bold
George: Hates Himself
Bob: Brash
Harvey: Hesitant
Rick: Insecure
George: Hates Himself
Bob:

I, UH... GOTTA GO...
EXIT
BANG
FREAK.
WEIRDO...
FASCINATING...
It's all there...
KEEP IT GOING, FOLKS...
BLAH, BLAH, BLAH...
BLAH, BLAH, BLAH...

I THINK WE NEED TO KILL THE WORD UNDERGARMENT AND GO WITH SOMETHING MORE MANLY, LIKE, WELL... BOXERS.
INTERESTING. WHAT DO THE REST OF YOU THINK?
I THINK IT'S GREAT-- PROTECTIVE BOXERS!
BOXERS IS GOOD, BUT...PROTECTIVE SOUNDS TOO MEDICAL.
HOW ABOUT WATERPROOF?
WATERPROOF?
WATERPROOF BOXERS? ARE YOU FUCKING SERIOUS?
WE NEED SOMETHING RUGGED AND TOUGH.
I GOT IT... HOW ABOUT BULLETPROOF?
BULLETPROOF BOXERS...THAT'S PERFECT!
SLAM
BULLETPROOF BOXERS

5:02 PM

...and into the wild, AGAIN.

SOON I WAS BACK IN THE JUBILEE.
HOPING SHE MIGHT SHOW UP AGAIN...
HOURS PASSED, AND ONLY ONE VOICE RANG...
YO, YOU NEED THAT CHAIR?
NAH, GO AHEAD...TAKE IT.
SO... I HEADED HOME.
DING
DING
MR. JOSHUA... HOW YOU BE TONIGHT?
ME? OH, I'M DOING OKAY.
WHY JUST OKAY? WHY NOT GOOD?
I DON'T KNOW...JUST TIRED, I GUESS.

WORKING TOO HARD. NOT SLEEPING WELL...
NO YOU WORRY, MR. JOSHUA. THINGS BE LOOKING UP FOR YOU. I CAN FEEL IT.
I SURE HOPE SO...
EXIT
EXCUSE ME.
OPALS
STIMULUS.
STIMULUS.
STIMULUS.
UM... EXCUSE ME.
SHE'S YOUR NEIGHBOR.
WHAT?
SHE'S YOUR NEIGHBOR, ON THE LEFT SIDE.
I SEE...THAT'S INTERESTING. NOW, CAN I PLEASE GET PAST...
GWEN... SHE'S YOUR NEIGHBOR ON THE LEFT SIDE.
GWEN?!
REACTION!

I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT.
I DIDN'T BELIEVE IT.
AND YET...
SHE LEFT IT IN A PLACE SO EASY TO FIND.
GOD DOESN'T PLAY DICE...
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
JOSH, HI...HOW ARE YOU?
GWEN! I'M GOOD...VERY GOOD. I, UM...FOUND YOUR ANKLET.
I WAS WONDERING WHERE THAT WENT.
I WAS WONDERING WHERE YOU WENT. AND HERE YOU ARE...RIGHT NEXT DOOR.
HERE I AM...
LISTEN JOSH, I'M SORRY BUT I'M BUSY RIGHT NOW...WORKING.
OH--I DIDN'T MEAN TO JUST, WELL...
HERE YOU GO...
THANKS. YOU'RE A DOLL...

I, UM... WAS WONDERING IF...
IF...
UM...MAYBE YOU WANNA TAKE A BREAK FOR DINNER?
I CAN'T. I HAVE A CLIENT WAITING *INSIDE*, AS WE SPEAK.
OH, OH... OKAY...NO PROBLEM.
HOW ABOUT THIS? I'LL STOP BY YOUR PLACE AFTER...IF THAT'S ALL RIGHT?
HOME-OFFICE.
ABSOLUTELY!

So I waited...
8:22 PM
9:33 PM
10:44 PM
until...
KNOCK KNOCK
FINALLY...
I RUSHED TO THE DOOR, STRAIGHTENED MY SHIRT, AND OPENED UP. ONLY TO FIND...
HEY DUDE, I'M VERGE-- FROM 2A.
CRUNCH
CHIPS?
THANKS, NO... I'M, A...JOSHUA...JOSH. I MOVED IN A FEW DAYS AGO.
WHY?
CHIPS
YEAH--I SAW THE TRUCK.

Brrrring
DUDE, HANG ON A SEC...
HELLO...
WHAT'S UP? NO. NO. NO... LISTEN, BABE, I'M IN THE MIDDLE OF MEETING MY NEW NEIGHBOR.
NO, I'M LIKE STANDING IN HIS DOOR, WAITING FOR HIM TO INVITE ME IN. OK. OK. LATER, BABE!
THAT WAS LEXI...THE GIRL'S A FREAK. SENDS ME DIRTY TEXTS LIKE YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE.
ANYWAY, YOU WERE SAYING?
UM...YOU WANNA COME IN?
DUDE, YOUR PLACE IS SO NEAT. I BET YOU UNPACKED EVERYTHING ON YOUR FIRST NIGHT HERE, AM I RIGHT?
Because
YO--GOT ANY LIQUIDS? IT'S THESE CHIPS, MAKE YOU WICKED THIRSTY.
SURE...LET ME CHECK.
Because
SHIT! I HAD TO GET RID OF THIS GUY BEFORE GWEN CAME OVER. SO I MADE A PLAN--KEEP IT SHORT!
KETTERMAN
POCUS
I FOUND SOME COKE.
MARKET RESEARCH, HUH?

YEAH, FOCUS GROUPS, STUFF LIKE THAT.
CHIPS AND DRIPS--KEEPS ME GOING, ALL DAY, ALL NIGHT. I'M A PROGRAMMER, A BIT-BANGER... FREELANCE FROM HOME.
WORKING ON MY OWN BIG PROJECT... TO CHANGE THE WHOLE WORLD.
YO, YOU MEET ANY OTHER TENANTS YET?
OH, YEAH-- I MET OPAL AND OSCAR DOWNSTAIRS. THEY SEEM NICE.
ALSO... I RAN INTO A STRANGE GUY WITH LONG HAIR. DOES HE LIVE HERE?
ANOTHER TEXT FROM LEXI...
BEEP
BEEP
BEEP
THE LONG-HAIRED DUDE IS ANGSTON. GUY'S A FREAK.
HE RENTED THE ENTIRE THIRD FLOOR, ALL THREE APARTMENTS, THEN KNOCKED OUT THE WALLS TO MAKE ONE HUGE ROOM.
BUT HE'S GOT LIKE NOTHING IN IT, NO FRIDGE, NO STOVE, NO BED... HE PAYS OPAL TO BRING UP ALL HIS MEALS.
REALLY...WHY?
BECAUSE HE'S A NUT-
THE GUY WAS ONCE A PROFESSOR AT BERKELEY, WELL RESPECTED,
BUT THEN FLIPPED-HIS-WIG... GOT FIRED FOR BREAKING INTO SOME OTHER DUDE'S LAB AND SMASHING IT UP.
...RELEASING HIS RESEARCH ANIMALS, STEALING HIS DATA. CRAZY SHIT.

AND HE LIVES UPSTAIRS? IS HE DANGEROUS?
ANGSTON... NAH, HE WOULDN'T HURT A FLY.
HE'S ONE OF THOSE ACTIVIST TYPES, ALWAYS PROTESTING SHIT--HOLIER THAN THOU.
SO, MEET ANYONE ELSE?
YEAH, I, UM... MET GWEN DOWN THE HALL.
REALLY... AND?!
AND WHAT?
AND...DID SHE DO YOU YET?
HUH?
DID SHE F-U-C-K YOU YET?
SHE DID, I CAN SEE IT ON YOUR FACE!
BRO--THAT'S HOW SHE WELCOMES ALL THE NEW GUYS WHO MOVE IN. ALWAYS!
WHENEVER A YOUNG SINGLE DUDE SHOWS UP...
...BANG--SHE DOES HIM, USUALLY DURING HIS FIRST WEEK HERE...
IF NOT...SHE SAYS THERE'S TOO MUCH TENSION IN THE BUILDING.
TOO MUCH... TENSION?
YOU GOT IT, BRO... RATHER THAN PUT UP WITH ALL THE SILLY SMILES AND FUNNY LOOKS...
...THE DUDE TRYING TO GET INTO HER SKIRT...
...SHE JUST BREAKS THE TENSION RIGHT AWAY...
KA-BOOM
BEEP

OH, BREAK'S OVER DUDE... I'VE GOT TWO SUBROUTINES TO CRANK BY SUNRISE AND A FULL PARITY TEST.
WORKING ON A KILLER INVENTION
BEEP BEEP BEEP WHY?
SO...GWEN... REALLY?
---GONNA CHANGE THE WHOLE WORLD!
WHY?
DON'T SWEAT IT, BRO--CONSIDER GWEN A MOVE-IN-BONUS. I KNOW I DID!
BANG
SOMETIMES I WONDER HOW I GOT HERE...
OPALS MARKET
NOT TO THIS PLACE, TO THIS PERSON.
I MEAN REALLY, WHAT THE FUCK?
IT ALWAYS STARTS THE SAME, WITH ME FLAT ON MY BACK IN A HUGE EMPTY ROOM, UNABLE TO GET UP...
THEN THE FACES APPEAR, LOOKING DOWN ON ME, ALL GRIM AND SERIOUS LIKE THEY THINK I'M GONNA DIE OR SOMETHING.
SO I CLENCH MY EYES...

AND WHEN I OPEN UP, I'M IN A DIFFERENT PLACE.
SHE FUCKS ALL THE GUYS WHO MOVE IN.
IT MEANT NOTHING... NOTHING!
AND SHE BLEW JOSH OFF TONIGHT.
NEVER SHOWED UP!
IT MEANT NOTHING...
BLAH...
BLAH...
BLAH...
IT MEANT NOTHING
NOTES
SLAM
AND SUDDENLY, I'M BACK IN THE JUBILEE...HOPING THAT IT WAS ALL JUST A BAD DREAM.
THIS SEAT TAKEN?
GWEN! I HAVE THINGS TO TELL YOU--BIG THINGS, FASCINATING THINGS...
TAP
TAP
TAP
I KNOW YOU CAN SEE ME!
I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME!
I KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE.

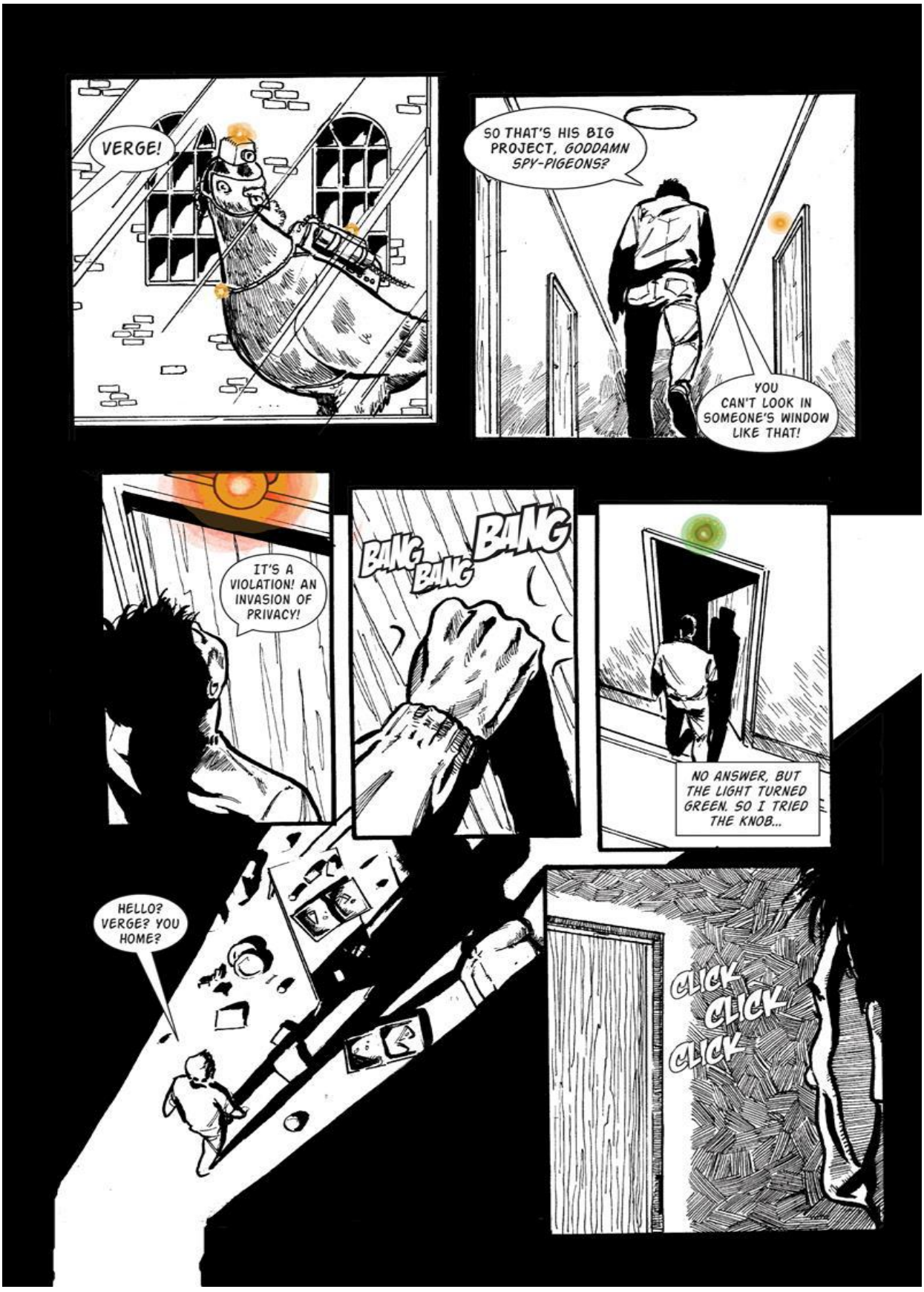
JUST IGNORE HIM AND HE'LL GO AWAY...
I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE UP TO!
I KNOW WHAT YOU'VE DONE!
SINNER!
AND THAT'S HOW THE DREAM ENDS, EVERY TIME, WITH SOMETHING WAKING ME UP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT...
3:33 AM
BUT TONIGHT WAS DIFFERENT, FOR WHEN I AWOKE...
I SAW A STRANGE ORANGE LIGHT IN MY WINDOW.
AND WHEN I WENT CLOSER...
WHAT THE FUCK!
3:34 AM

No, I wasn't still dreaming... this was a REAL pigeon!

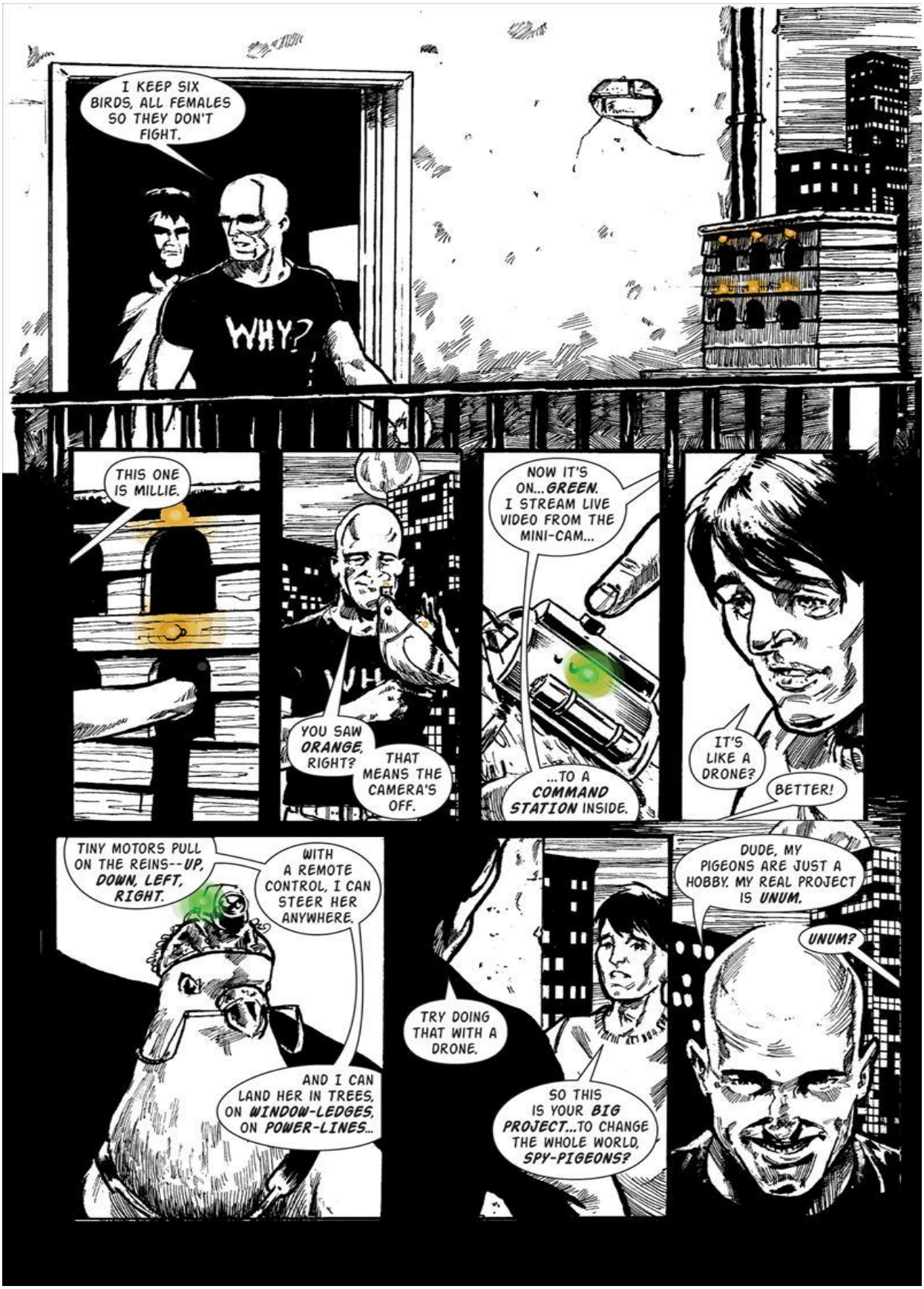
And it was staring right in at me, its creepy little CAMERA aimed square at my face!

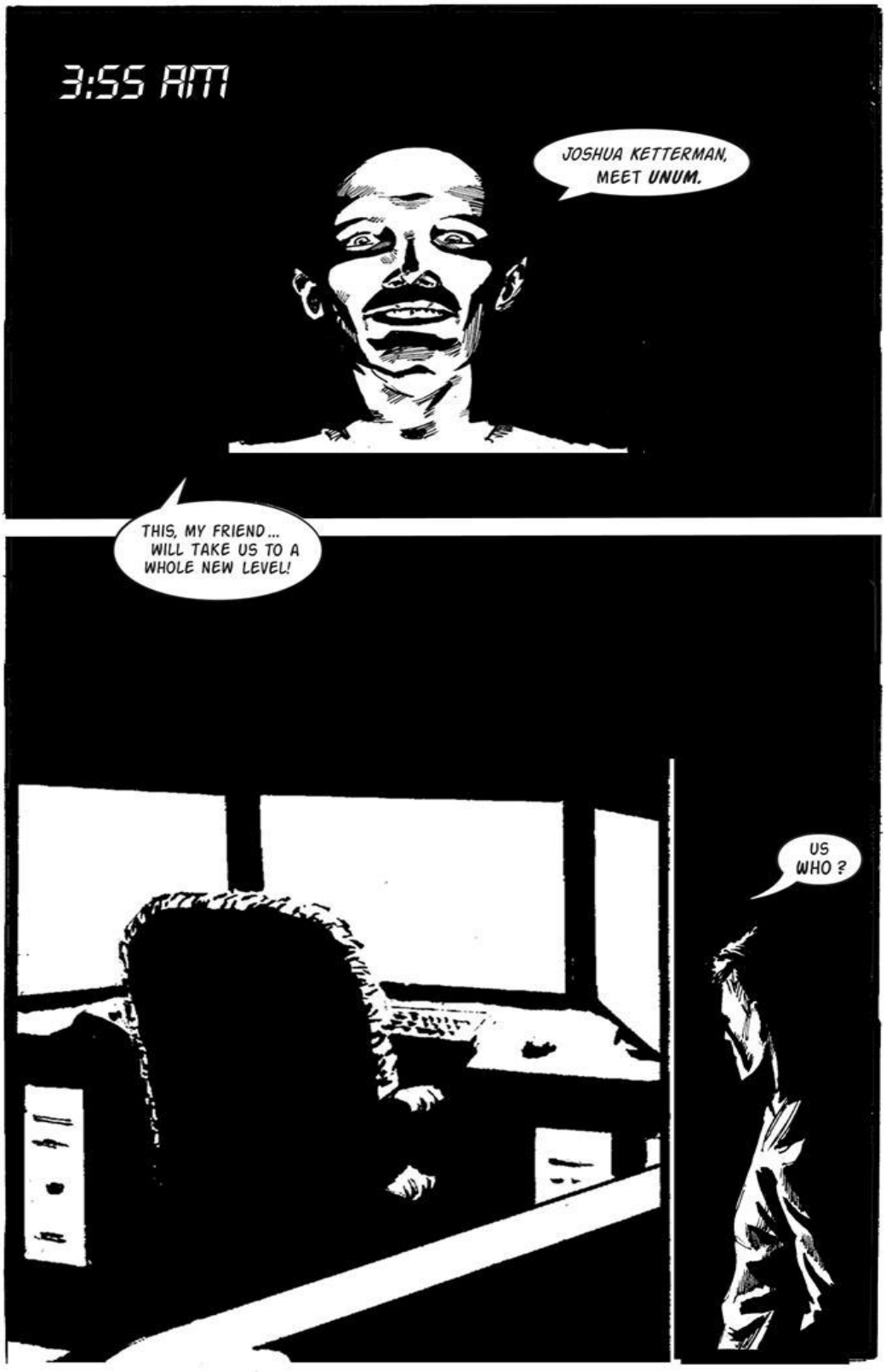
I tapped and banged and YELLED, but it wouldn't go away. It didn't even flinch!

Then I noticed... its tiny HARNESS had an embossed letter "V".


VERGE!
SO THAT'S HIS BIG PROJECT, GODDAMN SPY-PIGEONS?
YOU CAN'T LOOK IN SOMEONE'S WINDOW LIKE THAT!
IT'S A VIOLATION! AN INVASION OF PRIVACY!
BANG BANG BANG
NO ANSWER, BUT THE LIGHT TURNED GREEN. SO I TRIED THE KNOB...
HELLO? VERGE? YOU HOME?
CLICK CLICK CLICK

VERGE...HEY, VERGE!
DUDE, HANG ON A SEC...BIG PROJECT.
CLICK
CLICK
CLICK
I'M HERE BECAUSE OF THE PIGEON...
...THE ONE WITH THE CAMERA ON ITS HEAD!
AND?
AND? YOU CAN'T PUT A CAMERA IN SOMEONE'S WINDOW!
DUDE... CHILL OUT.
IT'S YOUR BIRD, RIGHT?
RELAX... THE CAMERA WASN'T EVEN ON.
THE GUY WHO LIVED THERE BEFORE YOU, DANNY...
...HE LOVED MY BIRDS. HE PUT FOOD OUT FOR THEM EVERY NIGHT.
IT WAS LOOKING FOR FOOD?
YOU GOT IT, BRO.
AND THE VIDEO WASN'T ON?
REALLY?
FUCK IT... I'LL SHOW YOU.
FOLLOW ME.


I KEEP SIX BIRDS, ALL FEMALES SO THEY DON'T FIGHT.
WHY?
THIS ONE IS MILLIE.
YOU SAW ORANGE, RIGHT?
THAT MEANS THE CAMERA'S OFF.
NOW IT'S ON... GREEN. I STREAM LIVE VIDEO FROM THE MINI-CAM...
...TO A COMMAND STATION INSIDE.
IT'S LIKE A DRONE?
BETTER!
TINY MOTORS PULL ON THE REINS--UP, DOWN, LEFT, RIGHT.
WITH A REMOTE CONTROL, I CAN STEER HER ANYWHERE.
AND I CAN LAND HER IN TREES, ON WINDOW-LEDGES, ON POWER-LINES...
TRY DOING THAT WITH A DRONE.
SO THIS IS YOUR BIG PROJECT...TO CHANGE THE WHOLE WORLD, SPY-PIGEONS?
DUDE, MY PIGEONS ARE JUST A HOBBY. MY REAL PROJECT IS UNUM.
UNUM?

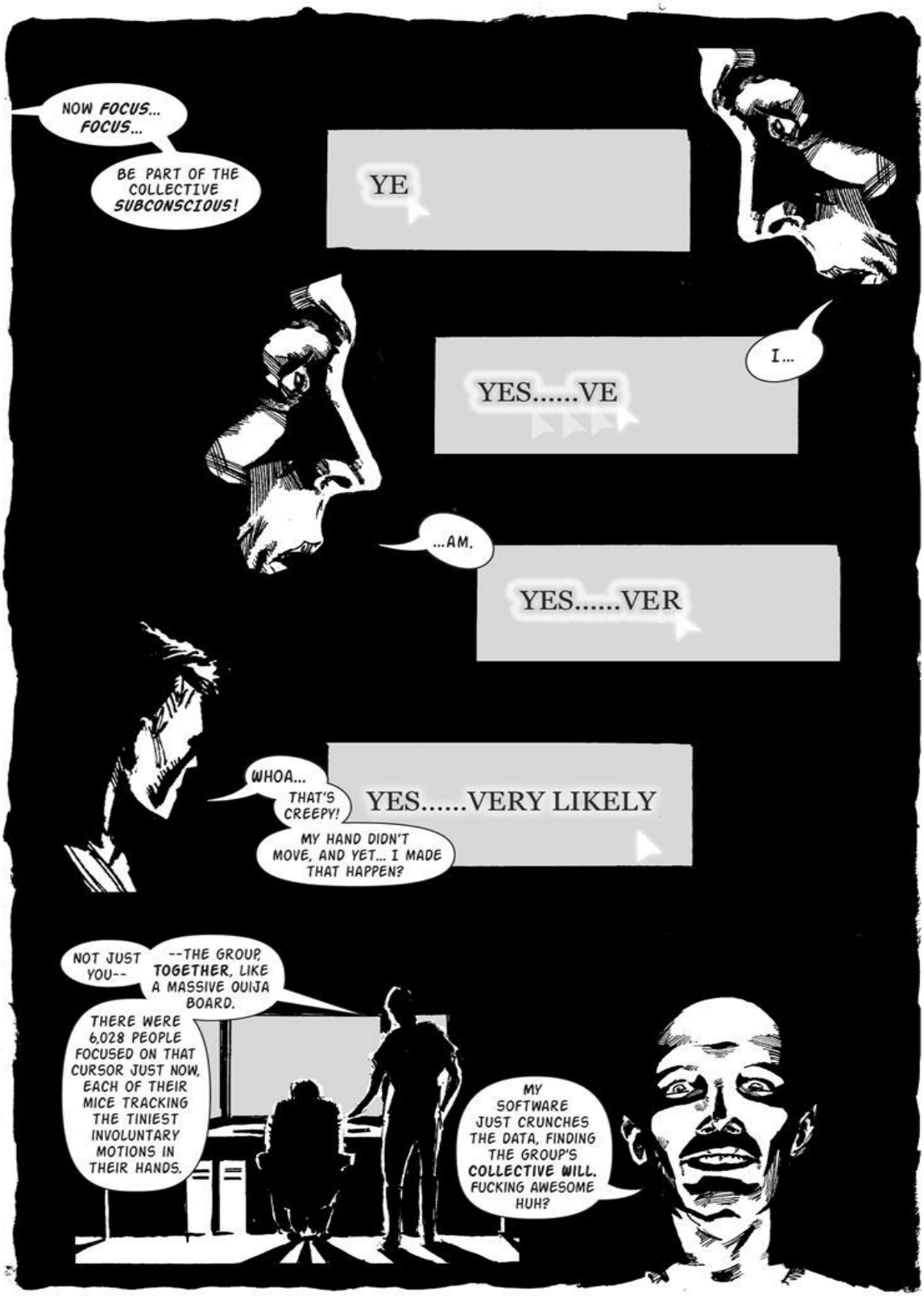

3:55 AM
JOSHUA KETTERMAN, MEET UNUM.
THIS, MY FRIEND... WILL TAKE US TO A WHOLE NEW LEVEL!
US WHO ?

EVERYONE...
DUDE, BELIEVE ME... THIS PROJECT IS GONNA CHANGE THE WHOLE FUCKING WORLD.
CLICK
CLICK
ABCDEMDIKEKLM
NOPORSTAREXYZ
1234567890
GO AHEAD, ASK HIM A QUESTION.
HIM? WHO'S HIM? VERGE, IF I'M SUPPOSED TO FOLLOW THIS--
JOSH, JUST ASK HIM A QUESTION.
WHY? HOW?
WITH THE KEYBOARD, EINSTEIN... JUST TYPE IN A QUESTION, ANYTHING YOU WANT.
FINE...
WOULD YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE BUYING ADULT DIAPERS IN A DRUGSTORE?
DUDE, YOU'RE A FUCKING NUT.
NOW WHAT?
NOW WATCH THE CURSOR...
ABCDEFGHIJKLM
NOPQRSTUVWXYZ
1234567890
CLICK
CLICK
CLICK
IT'S MOVING BY ITSELF?
ABCDEFGHIJKLM
NOPQRSTUVWXYZ
1234567890

THERE'S YOUR ANSWER -- "NEVER!"
WHAT IS THIS?
NEVER
UNUM... ASK HIM ANOTHER QUESTION.
FINE... "WHAT IF WE CALL THEM PROTECTIVE UNDERGARMENTS INSTEAD?"
WHAT IF WE CALL THEM PROTECTIVE UNDERGARMENTS INSTEAD?
BRO, YOU'RE A FUCKING LOON.
THERE'S YOUR ANSWER.
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
NO, THAT'S WORSE
12345678
WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?
UNUM-- THAT'S LATIN FOR THE ONE.
IT'S AN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE PROGRAM?
BETTER...
IT'S REAL INTELLIGENCE... COLLABORATIVE INTELLIGENCE.
RIGHT NOW WE'VE GOT 6,027 PARTICIPANTS.
DUDE, YOU EVER USE A OUIJA BOARD AS A KID?
WHY?

IT WORKS THE SAME...
...BUT INSTEAD OF A FEW DOPEY KIDS MOVING A PUCK AROUND WITH THEIR FINGERS, PRETENDING TO SUMMON A GHOST...
...I'VE GOT 6,000 PEOPLE LOGGED IN FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD, GUIDING THAT CURSOR AROUND WITH THEIR MICE.
BUT WHAT THEY SEE ON THE SCREEN ISN'T THEIR OWN INPUT.
IT'S AN AMALGAMATION OF ALL THE INPUT, NUMERICALLY COMBINED.
6,000 PEOPLE JUST MOVED THAT CURSOR... TOGETHER?
EXACTAMUNDO!
BUT IF YOU ASKED ANY ONE OF THEM...
...THEY'D SWEAR IT WENT BY ITSELF--THAT THEY BARELY MOVED THEIR OWN HAND, LIKE A OUIJA BOARD.
THAT'S THE POWER OF THE SYSTEM--IT EVOKES THE COLLABORATIVE SUBCONSCIOUS OF THE GROUP, THE COLLECTIVE WILL, DRAWING FORTH ITS GUT REACTIONS, ITS RAW INSTINCTS.
HOW ABOUT, BULLETPROOF BOXERS?
I LOVE IT!
THIS IS 6,000 PEOPLE?
THIS IS UNUM...THE VOICE OF HUMANITY!

WILL THE GIANTS WIN TOMORROW?
DUDE, SIT DOWN AND TRY IT. BE PART OF THE GROUP.
I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THE GIANTS.
LOOK...
...SOMEONE ELSE JUST TYPED IN A QUESTION.
WE'VE GOT PRIORITY HERE, BUT ANYONE WHO EARNS ENOUGH POINTS BY GIVING INPUT, CAN ASK THEIR OWN QUESTIONS. THAT'S THE DRAW...
THAT DOESN'T MATTER. JUST LAY YOUR HAND ON THE MOUSE, STARE AT THE SCREEN, AND RELAX...CLEAR YOUR HEAD...DON'T THINK TOO MUCH ABOUT THE QUESTION.
FINE...
OKAY, NOW THE KEY... FOCUS ON THE CURSOR AND TRY TO MOVE IT WITH YOUR MIND, NOT YOUR HAND.
ARE YOU JOKING?
JUST DO IT...IT WORKS.


NOW FOCUS... FOCUS...
BE PART OF THE COLLECTIVE SUBCONSCIOUS!
YE
I...
YES.....VE
...AM.
YES.....VER
WHOA...
THAT'S CREEPY!
MY HAND DIDN'T MOVE, AND YET... I MADE THAT HAPPEN?
YES.....VERY LIKELY
NOT JUST YOU--
--THE GROUP, TOGETHER, LIKE A MASSIVE OUIJA BOARD.
THERE WERE 6,028 PEOPLE FOCUSED ON THAT CURSOR JUST NOW, EACH OF THEIR MICE TRACKING THE TINIEST INVOLUNTARY MOTIONS IN THEIR HANDS.
MY SOFTWARE JUST CRUNCHES THE DATA, FINDING THE GROUP'S COLLECTIVE WILL. FUCKING AWESOME HUH?

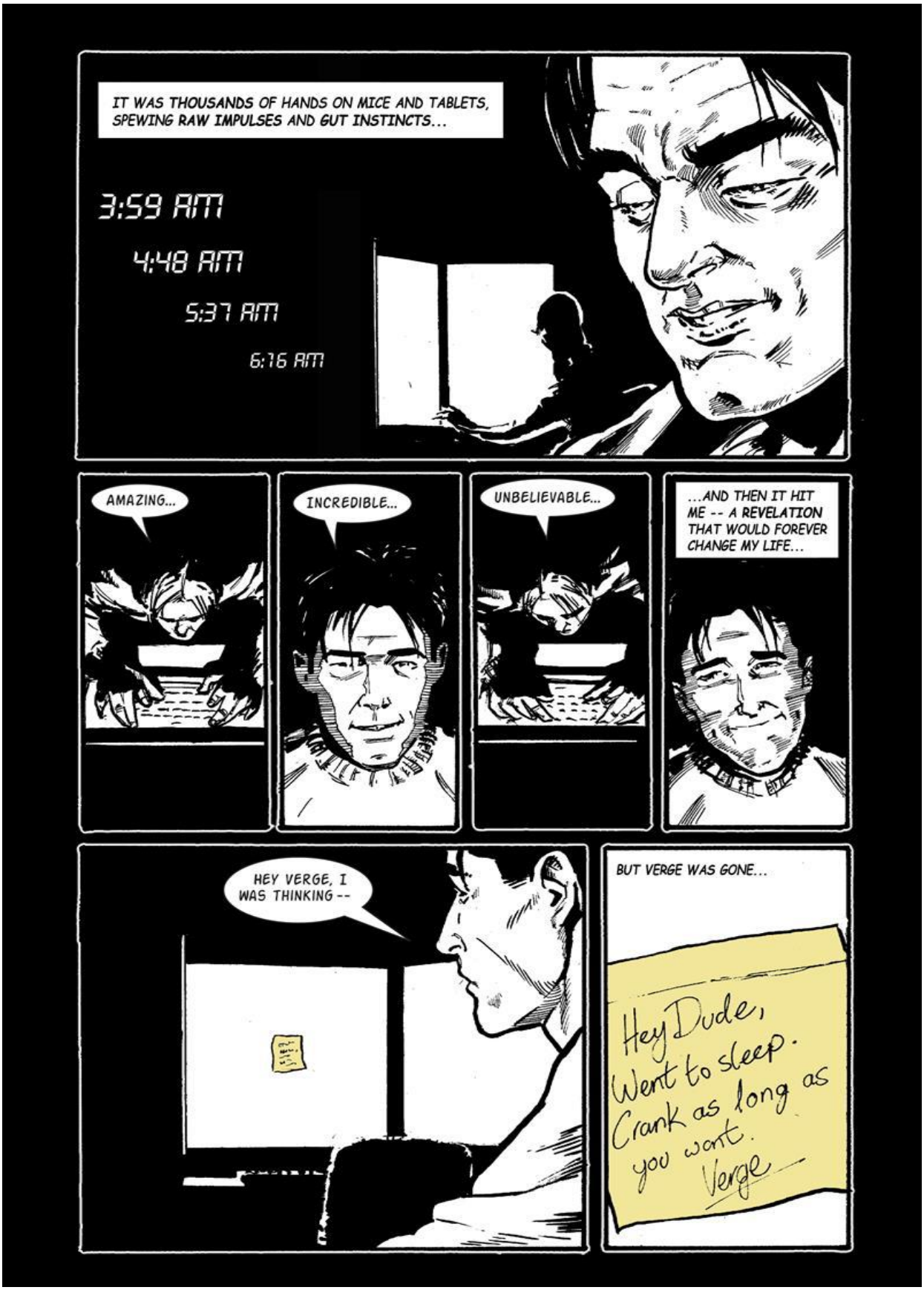
AND THE ANSWER...IT'S CORRECT?
HE'S NOT PSYCHIC, BUT UNUM IS PRETTY DAMN SMART...
...6,000 BRAINS WORKING AS ONE.
IMAGINE HOW SMART HE'LL BE WHEN HE'S MADE UP OF MILLIONS, OR MORE!
AND IT REALLY ANSWERED ME?
NOT IT... HIM. AND YES, HE ANSWERED. LOOK...
I'M HARNESSING INPUT FROM PEOPLE ALL AROUND THE GLOBE AND USING IT TO BUILD A NEW FORM OF INTELLIGENCE, A NEW FORM OF CONSCIOUSNESS!
CONSCIOUSNESS?!
JOSH, THE HUMAN BRAIN IS MADE UP OF BILLIONS OF TINY NEURONS, EACH ONE ABLE TO PERFORM ONLY SIMPLE FUNCTIONS.
BUT WHEN ENOUGH ARE LINKED TOGETHER, AMAZING FEATS OF CREATIVITY AND PROBLEM SOLVING EMERGE.
AS SOON AS I'VE GOT A LARGE ENOUGH NETWORK OF USERS, A SUPER-CONSCIOUSNESS WILL EMERGE.
A TRUE SUPER-INTELLIGENCE!
WITH UNUM, I'M JUST REPLICATING THE PROCESS ON A LARGER SCALE... BUILDING A BRAIN, MADE OF BRAINS!
AND IT REALLY ANSWERED ME?
DUDE, I GOTTA GET BACK TO WORK. BUT IF YOU WANT TO KEEP SLAMMING OUT QUESTIONS, GO FOR IT--OVER THERE. I COULD USE THE HELP.
ABSOLUTELY!

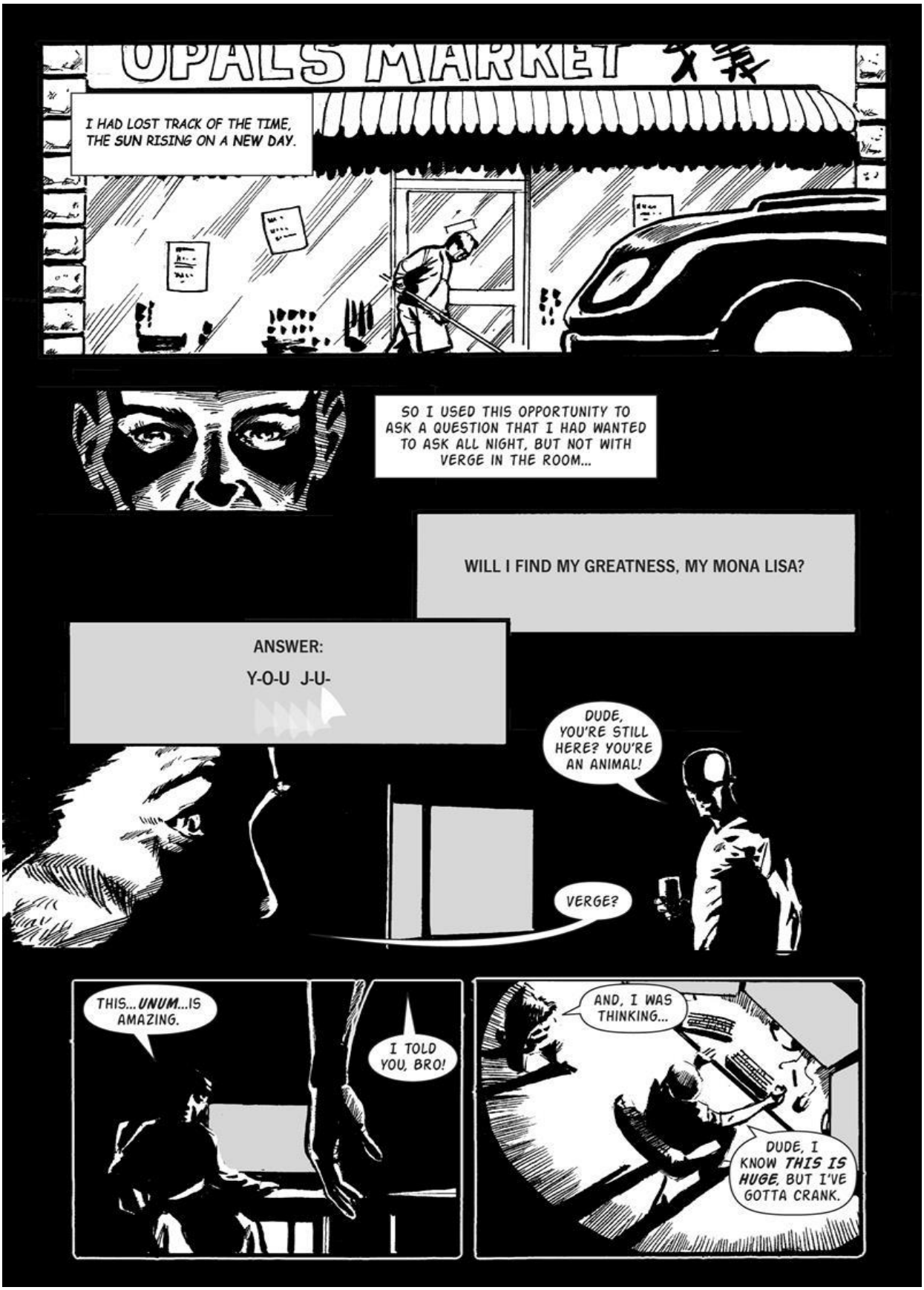
So I sat at the EXTRA COMPUTER in the corner...

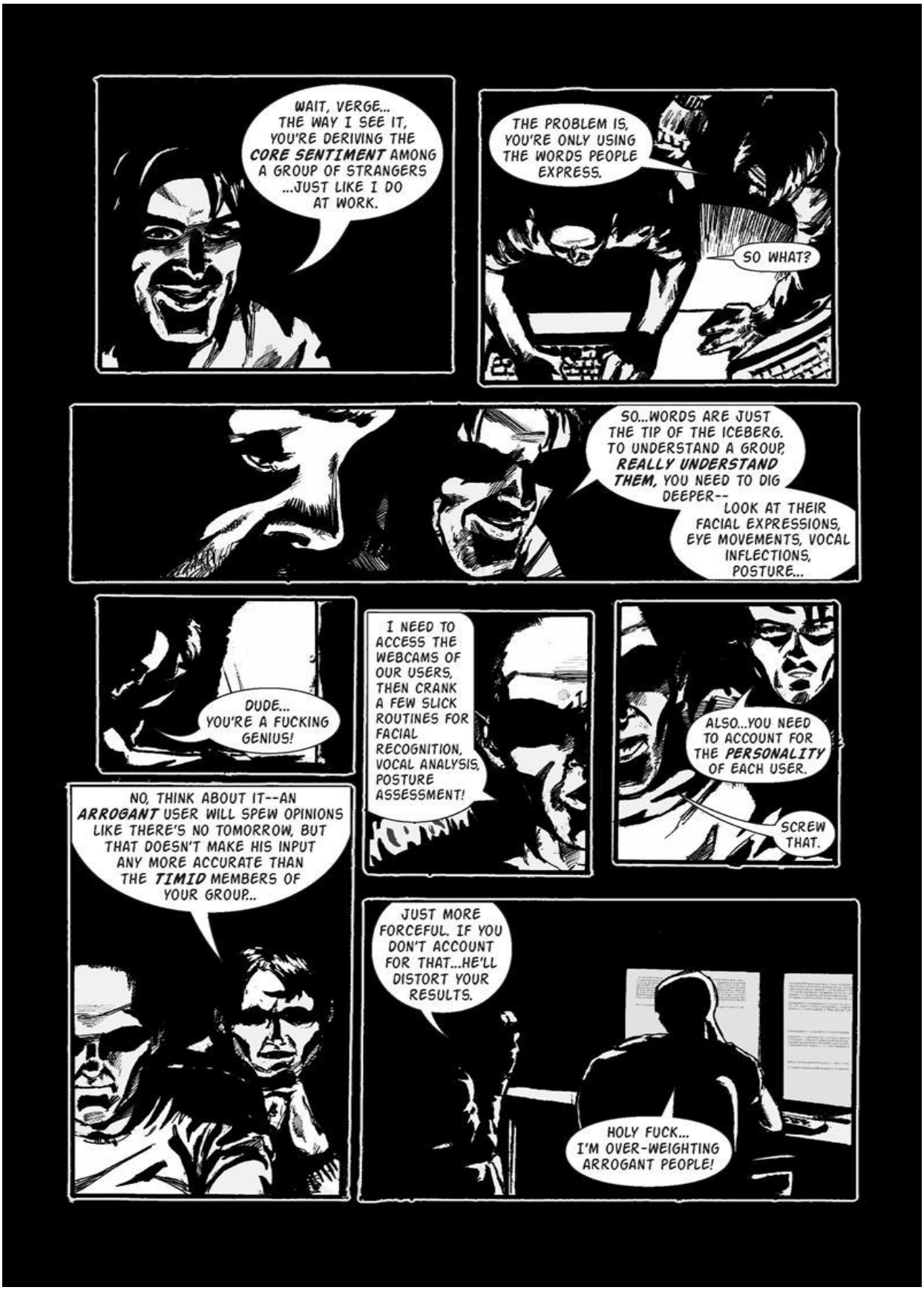
...tossing QUESTION after QUESTION at the legion of faceless participants, their eyes wide and minds focused.

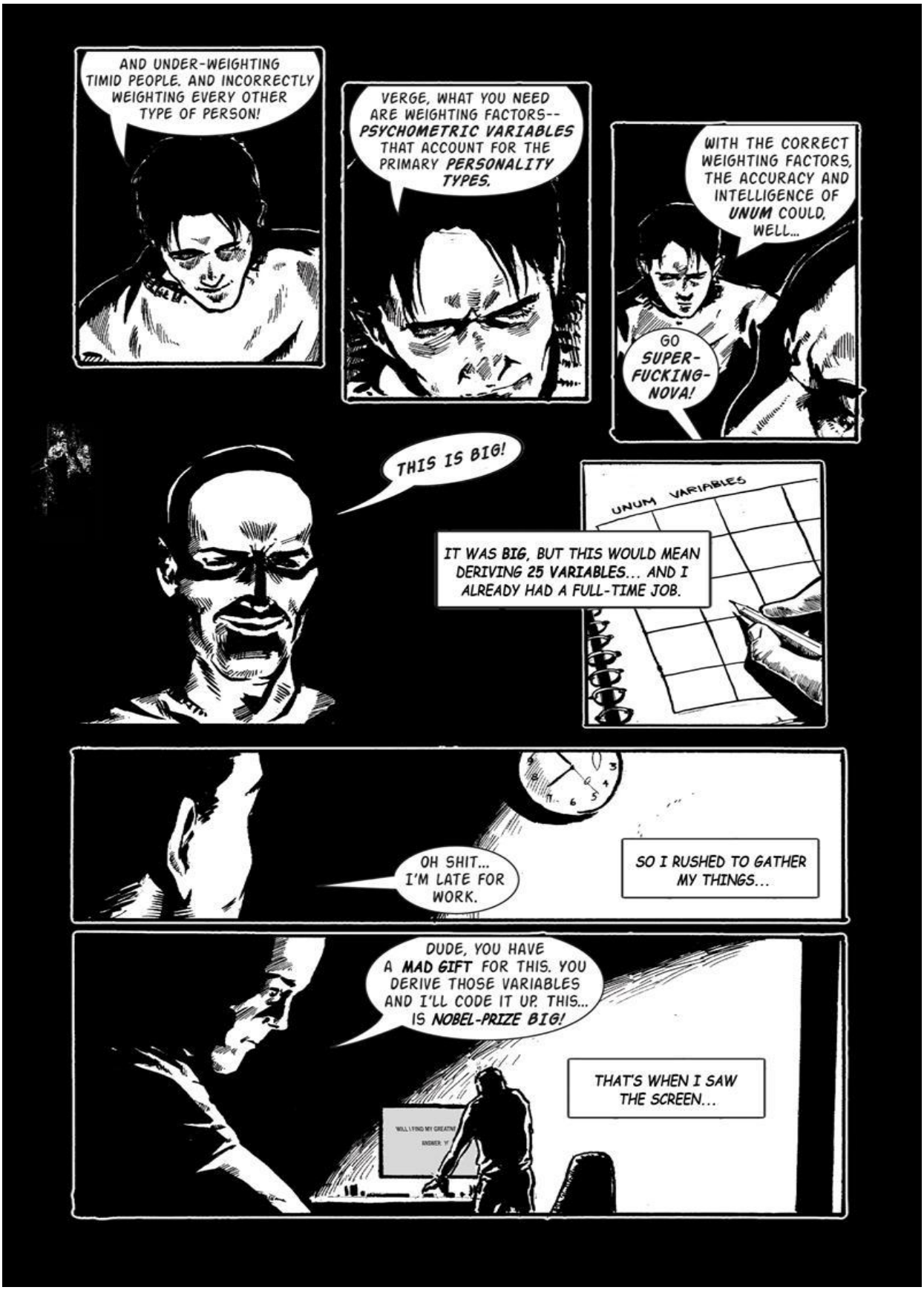
I have to admit, it made me feel good - POWERFUL- like I was conducting the largest FOCUS GROUP ever assembled.

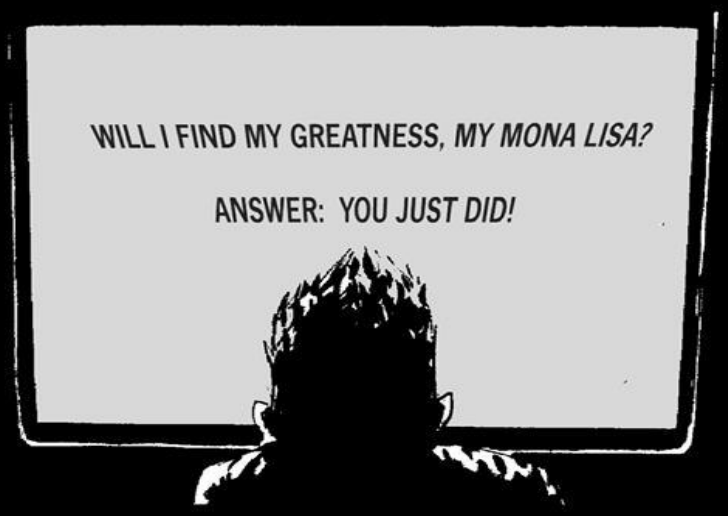
But it was MORE than that.
Much, much, more...


IT WAS THOUSANDS OF HANDS ON MICE AND TABLETS, SPEWING RAW IMPULSES AND GUT INSTINCTS...
3:59 AM
4:48 AM
5:37 AM
6:16 AM
AMAZING...
INCREDIBLE...
UNBELIEVABLE...
...AND THEN IT HIT ME -- A REVELATION THAT WOULD FOREVER CHANGE MY LIFE...
HEY VERGE, I WAS THINKING --
BUT VERGE WAS GONE...
Hey Dude, Went to sleep. Crank as long as you want. Verge


OPALS MARKET
I HAD LOST TRACK OF THE TIME, THE SUN RISING ON A NEW DAY.
SO I USED THIS OPPORTUNITY TO ASK A QUESTION THAT I HAD WANTED TO ASK ALL NIGHT, BUT NOT WITH VERGE IN THE ROOM...
WILL I FIND MY GREATNESS, MY MONA LISA?
ANSWER:
Y-O-U J-U-
DUDE, YOU'RE STILL HERE? YOU'RE AN ANIMAL!
VERGE?
THIS... UNUM...IS AMAZING.
I TOLD YOU, BRO!
AND, I WAS THINKING...
DUDE, I KNOW THIS IS HUGE, BUT I'VE GOTTA CRANK.


WAIT, VERGE... THE WAY I SEE IT, YOU'RE DERIVING THE CORE SENTIMENT AMONG A GROUP OF STRANGERS ...JUST LIKE I DO AT WORK.
THE PROBLEM IS, YOU'RE ONLY USING THE WORDS PEOPLE EXPRESS.
SO WHAT?
SO...WORDS ARE JUST THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG. TO UNDERSTAND A GROUP, REALLY UNDERSTAND THEM, YOU NEED TO DIG DEEPER--
LOOK AT THEIR FACIAL EXPRESSIONS, EYE MOVEMENTS, VOCAL INFLECTIONS, POSTURE...
DUDE... YOU'RE A FUCKING GENIUS!
I NEED TO ACCESS THE WEBCAMS OF OUR USERS, THEN CRANK A FEW SLICK ROUTINES FOR FACIAL RECOGNITION, VOCAL ANALYSIS, POSTURE ASSESSMENT!
KRAWW
ALSO...YOU NEED TO ACCOUNT FOR THE PERSONALITY OF EACH USER.
SCREW THAT.
NO, THINK ABOUT IT--AN ARROGANT USER WILL SPEW OPINIONS LIKE THERE'S NO TOMORROW, BUT THAT DOESN'T MAKE HIS INPUT ANY MORE ACCURATE THAN THE TIMID MEMBERS OF YOUR GROUP...
JUST MORE FORCEFUL. IF YOU DON'T ACCOUNT FOR THAT...HE'LL DISTORT YOUR RESULTS.
HOLY FUCK... I'M OVER-WEIGHTING ARROGANT PEOPLE!


AND UNDER-WEIGHTING TIMID PEOPLE. AND INCORRECTLY WEIGHTING EVERY OTHER TYPE OF PERSON!
VERGE, WHAT YOU NEED ARE WEIGHTING FACTORS-- PSYCHOMETRIC VARIABLES THAT ACCOUNT FOR THE PRIMARY PERSONALITY TYPES.
WITH THE CORRECT WEIGHTING FACTORS, THE ACCURACY AND INTELLIGENCE OF UNUM COULD, WELL...
GO SUPER-FUCKING-NOVA!
THIS IS BIG!
IT WAS BIG, BUT THIS WOULD MEAN DERIVING 25 VARIABLES... AND I ALREADY HAD A FULL-TIME JOB.
UNUM VARIABLES
OH SHIT... I'M LATE FOR WORK.
SO I RUSHED TO GATHER MY THINGS...
DUDE, YOU HAVE A MAD GIFT FOR THIS. YOU DERIVE THOSE VARIABLES AND I'LL CODE IT UP. THIS... IS NOBEL-PRIZE BIG!
THAT'S WHEN I SAW THE SCREEN...


WILL I FIND MY GREATNESS, *MY MONA LISA?*
ANSWER: YOU *JUST DID!*

PART TWO

My MONA LISA...

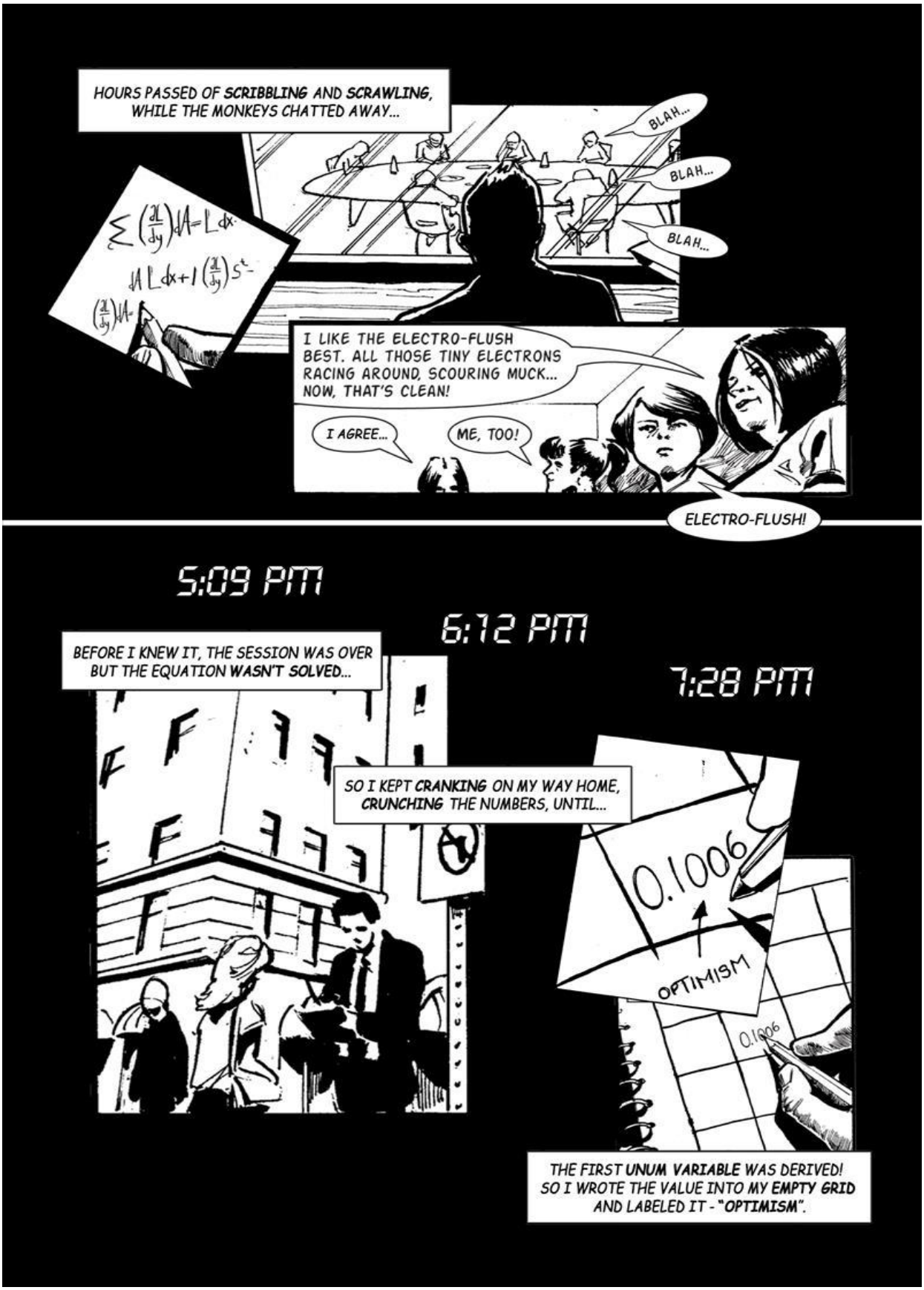
8:34 AM
I WAS RUNNING LATE FOR WORK, EXHAUSTED FROM A NIGHT OF HARDLY ANY SLEEP, BUT I DIDN'T CARE - I WAS FEELING GOOD...

HELL, I WAS ENERGIZED, READY FOR ANYTHING...
BIG THINGS!
YES... THE DARKNESS WAS FINALLY LIFTING. I COULD FEEL IT.

A FEW QUICK SNIPS AND CLIPS AND I WAS READY TO HEAD OUT, NOT EXPECTING ANY SURPRISES BETWEEN HERE AND THERE...
NO CALLS
THAT'S WHEN I SAW IT - A LITTLE PINK CARD. IT MUST HAVE BEEN SLIPPED UNDER MY DOOR WHILE I WAS SHOWERING...
WHAT THE HELL?

GWEN!
I DON'T KNOW WHY I WAS SO EXCITED TO GET A NOTE FROM GWEN AFTER ALL THE THINGS VERGE SAID ABOUT HER...
g
Hi Josh
Sorry I didn't come over last night, but a client showed up unexpectedly. I'll come by tonight instead. I promise
Love Gwen X
BUT I WAS EXCITED, FOR THIS MEANT SHE HADN'T JUST BLOWN ME OFF...
TONIGHT!
AND WITH THAT, I WAS ON MY WAY TO WORK, A SPRING IN MY STEP, A SMILE ON MY FACE...

SOON I WAS BACK IN MY LITTLE ROOM, BACK AT MY LITTLE DESK, A FRESH TRIBE OF MONKEYS BEFORE ME...
I LIKE THE OTHER ONE BETTER... IT TURNS THE WATER IN THE BOWL BLUE.
BUT IT'S JUST BLUE DYE... IT DOESN'T MAKE THE TOILET ANY CLEANER.
ELECTRO FLUSH!
SUM
ONLY TWO HOURS IN AND I KNEW THE ANSWER THE GROUP WOULD REACH - "ELECTRO FLUSH".
OF COURSE, THE MONKEYS NEEDED A FEW MORE HOURS OF POSTURING AND ARGUING TO GET THERE TOO...
BUT THAT WAS PERFECT, FOR IT GAVE ME TIME TO START SOLVING THE FIRST UNUM VARIABLE...
UNUM


HOURS PASSED OF SCRIBBLING AND SCRAWLING, WHILE THE MONKEYS CHATTED AWAY...
BLAH...
BLAH...
BLAH...
I LIKE THE ELECTRO-FLUSH BEST. ALL THOSE TINY ELECTRONS RACING AROUND, SCOURING MUCK... NOW, THAT'S CLEAN!
I AGREE...
ME, TOO!
ELECTRO-FLUSH!
5:09 PM
6:12 PM
7:28 PM
BEFORE I KNEW IT, THE SESSION WAS OVER BUT THE EQUATION WASN'T SOLVED...
SO I KEPT CRANKING ON MY WAY HOME, CRUNCHING THE NUMBERS, UNTIL...
0.1006
OPTIMISM
0.1006
THE FIRST UNUM VARIABLE WAS DERIVED! SO I WROTE THE VALUE INTO MY EMPTY GRID AND LABELED IT - "OPTIMISM".

ONE VARIABLE DOWN, TWENTY-FOUR TO GO. IT WOULD TAKE ME DAYS TO SOLVE THEM ALL, MAYBE WEEKS, BUT FIRST THINGS FIRST...
NO ENTRY
GWEN WOULD BE COMING OVER TONIGHT, SO I HAD TO GET HOME AND GET READY!
J
THAT MEANT STOPPING INTO OPAL'S MARKET AND PICKING UP A QUALITY BOTTLE OF WINE...
PA

BUT AS I ROUNDED THE CORNER, I WAS SHOCKED TO SEE, A LONG LINE OF PEOPLE SNAKING OUT OF OPAL'S MARKET.
OPAL'S
AND ALL OF THEM WERE HOLDING LITTLE PINK CARDS!
SO I PUSHED MY WAY INSIDE, CONFUSED AND ALARMED...
WHAT'S GOING ON?
IT'S THE LOTTERY. RECORD POT.
OH, OH...
I JUST NEED A BOTTLE OF WINE. DO I NEED TO WAIT?
NO, YOU CAN PAY LATER, BUT DO US FAVOR.
THIS BE DINNER FOR ANGSTON UPSTAIRS. WE TOO BUSY...CAN'T DELIVER.
UH, SURE... NO PROBLEM.
MR. JOSHUA...
WINE
GWEN LIKE PINOT GRIGIO BEST.

WAS I REALLY THAT OBVIOUS?
...PITNOT GRIGIO...
PROBABLY, BUT I DIDN'T CARE...
I JUST HAD TO MAKE A QUICK DELIVERY TO THE NUT ON THE 3RD FLOOR, TAKE A FAST SHOWER, AND WAIT FOR GWEN TO COME OVER...
THINGS WERE DEFINITELY LOOKING UP!

OF COURSE, I COULDN'T GO VISIT ANGSTON WITH A BOTTLE IN HAND...
SO I SET DOWN THE WINE AND MY NOTEBOOK OUTSIDE MY APARTMENT AND CONTINUED UP TO THE THIRD FLOOR...
WHAT THE HELL?
3
ANGSTON?
HELLO? ANGSTON? YOU UP HERE?
IS THAT YOU? ANGSTON!
I DON'T LIKE WALLS.

WHAT?
I DON'T LIKE WALLS. THEY BOX US IN.
WELL... YOU'RE NOT BOXED IN UP HERE.
SHHHHHHH
HUH?
CAN YOU HEAR IT? THE BITS AND BYTES BUZZING ALL AROUND US? THEY BOX US IN, NO MATTER WHERE WE ARE.
OK...
WELL...
THAT'S FROM OPAL. I GOTTA GO...
WAIT... ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH THESE MEN?
EINSTEIN
a biograph
FRANKENSTEIN
BY MARY SHELLEY
EINSTEIN AND FRANKENSTEIN?
YOU ARE FAMILIAR! WHICH ONE SAID...
...WE'RE SLAVES TO OUR OWN CREATIONS, FORGING THE MEANS OF OUR OWN DESTRUCTION?

I DON'T KNOW...IT MUST HAVE BEEN DR. FRANKENSTEIN, TALKING ABOUT HIS BIG GREEN UGLY--
WRONG! IT WAS EINSTEIN, AND HE WAS TALKING ABOUT THE ATOMIC BOMB.
EINSTEIN WAS BRAVE, WARNING THE WORLD OF THE DANGERS HE SAW COMING, DANGERS BORN FROM HIS OWN BRILLIANT EQUATIONS!
BUT DR. FRANKENSTEIN... HE WAS A COWARD, UNLEASHING A MONSTER UPON THE WORLD WITHOUT MINDING THE CONSEQUENCES, WITHOUT GIVING THE DANGERS A SECOND THOUGHT!
OK...WELL, I'LL...REMEMBER THAT.
ARE YOU BRAVE...JOSHUA KETTERMAN?
OR JUST ANOTHER COWARD!?
NUT-JOB...

I HAVE TO ADMIT, I WAS **RELIEVED** TO GET BACK TO THE **2ND FLOOR**, WHERE THE GROUND FELT MORE **SOLID** AND THE AIR DIDN'T SEEM SO **THIN**...
?
BUT THEN I DISCOVERED THE UNTHINKABLE... MY **NOTEBOOK** AND THE **WINE BOTTLE** WERE GONE! WHO THE HELL WOULD TAKE MY STUFF?

THIS FUCKING BUILDING...
...FULL OF THIEVES...
CLICK
THEN I REALIZED: GWEN WAS NAPPING ON MY COUCH, THE WINE AND NOTEBOOK SET SAFELY ON MY COFFEE TABLE...
UM... HELLO.
JOSH, YOU'RE HOME...
HOW... HOW'D YOU GET IN HERE?
I HAVE A KEY.
FOR MY APARTMENT?
YUP...THE GUY WHO LIVED HERE BEFORE YOU, DANNY, HE GAVE ME HIS EXTRA ONE...
...IN CASE OF EMERGENCIES.
WANT IT BACK?

UM...NO...IT'S GOOD YOU HAVE IT... FOR EMERGENCIES.
I GOTTA SAY JOSHUA, YOU SEEM TENSE. IT'S UNHEALTHY.
BUT I'VE GOT JUST THE THING TO EASE YOUR TENSIONS.
NO... THANKS. I'M GOOD.
YOU AT LEAST GOT SOME WINE?
PINOT GRIGIO
....MAYBE A NICE ITALIAN PINOT?
I JUST MIGHT...
LET ME GET TWO GLASSES FROM THE KITCHEN.
DON'T FORGET A CORKSCREW.
RIGHT...
MY HEAD WAS SPINNING...
AFTER WHAT VERGE HAD SAID, I NEEDED TO ASK WHAT THIS MEANT - US... HERE... NOW...

SO I HEADED BACK INTO THE LIVING ROOM, DETERMINED TO CLEAR THE AIR...
YOU KNOW, I WAS TALKING TO VERGE THE OTHER DAY AND HE--
BUT THINGS WENT IN A VERY DIFFERENT DIRECTION...
FIND A SCREW?

OPALS MARKET
OH...
OH, JOSH...
OH, JOSH... JOSH!
GWEN!
AND WHEN IT WAS OVER, I WAS STILL LEFT WONDERING WHAT THIS ALL MEANT.
YOU KNOW, I WAS THINKING...
IT'S A CRAZY COINCIDENCE, US MEETING AT THE JUBILEE THE OTHER NIGHT, BEING NEIGHBORS AND ALL.
YEAH... CRAZY.
SO, I WAS WONDERING, IF...WELL, ALL THIS, IS BECAUSE I JUST MOVED IN NEXT DOOR.
ALL WHAT?
UM... WELL...
JUST SAY IT, JOSH...
...YOU WANT TO KNOW IF I'M FUCKING YOU BECAUSE YOU MOVED IN NEXT DOOR AND I DON'T WANT ANY AWKWARD TENSION BETWEEN US.
THAT'S WHAT VERGE TOLD YOU, RIGHT?

SO, IS THIS... THAT... OR NOT?
DOES IT MATTER?
OF COURSE IT MATTERS!
WHY?
BECAUSE... WELL... BECAUSE!
BECAUSE YOU LIKE ME? OR BECAUSE YOU JUST NEED SOMEONE TO MAKE YOU FEEL EXTRA SPECIAL INSIDE?
IT'S NOT LIKE THAT...
OH NO?
FOCUS
JOSH KETTERMAN
I BET YOU FEEL EXTRA-SPECIAL IN THAT LITTLE GLASS ROOM OF YOURS, WATCHING PEOPLE, JUDGING THEM, JOTTING DOWN YOUR LITTLE NOTES, LIKE YOU'RE SOMEHOW BETTER THAN THEY ARE, SMARTER, MORE POWERFUL.
ISN'T THAT WHY YOU DO WHAT YOU DO?
IT'S NOT LIKE THAT!
OF COURSE IT'S NOT...
YOU SEE, JOSH... THAT'S WHAT IT FEELS LIKE WHEN THIS MEANS SOMETHING. IT HURTS A LITTLE. OTHERWISE, I'M JUST A REALLY GOOD FUCK, RIGHT?

SO, WHAT YOU'RE SAYING IS...
I LIKE YOU JOSH, BUT THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY YOU'LL EVER FEEL *SPECIAL* INSIDE AND IT'S NOT ABOUT ME. IT'S ABOUT—
BONNG
BONNG
OH SHIT, I HAVE A CLIENT COMING OVER ANY MINUTE. I GOTTA GO...
BUT...
SLAM
BEEP
BEEP
BEEP
HUH...
NEW MSG
DUDE, GET OVER HERE... YOU'RE A FUCKING GENIUS!

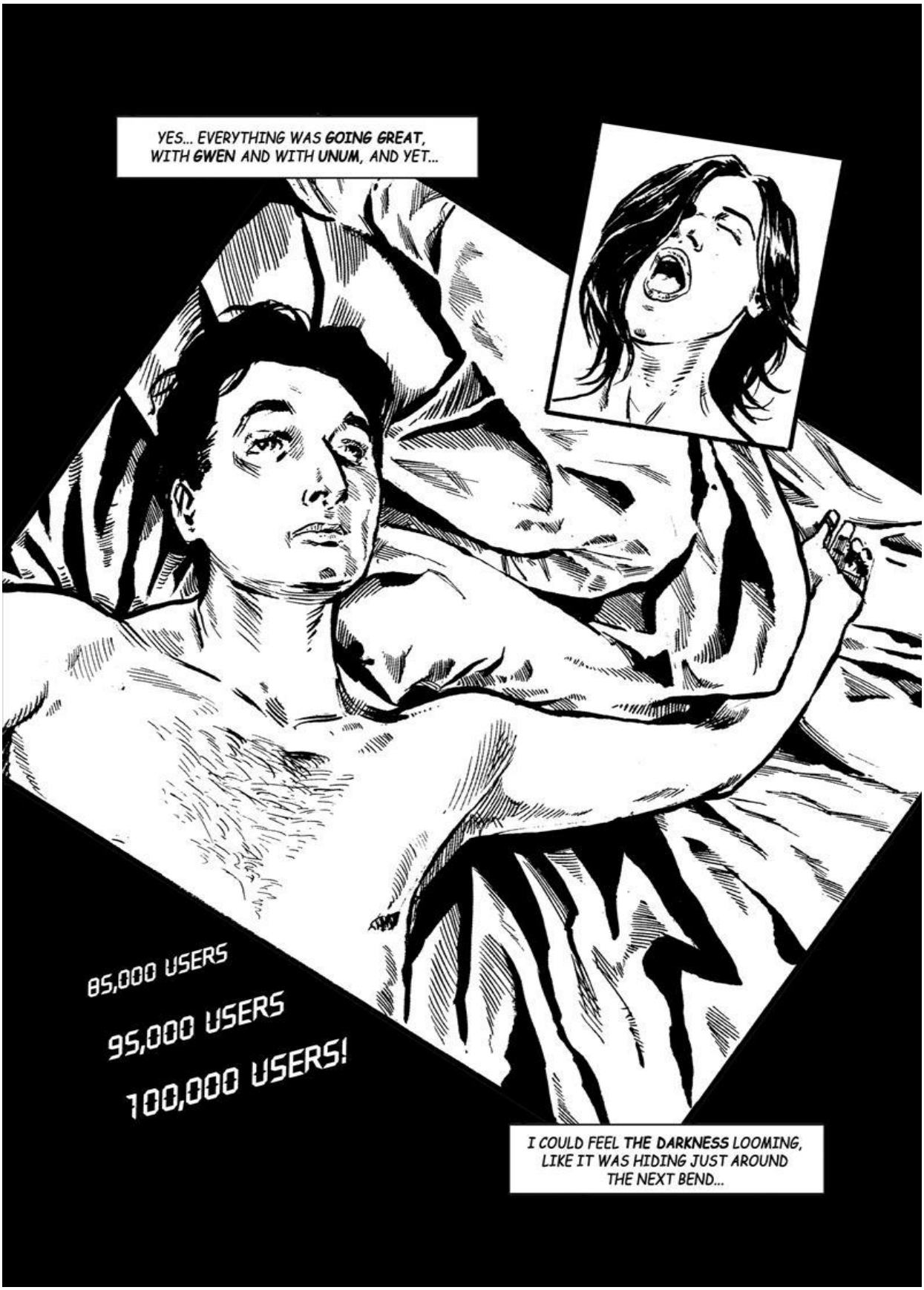
11:56 PM
SO... I HEADED DOWN TO VERGE'S PLACE, UNSURE WHAT TO EXPECT.
HELLO? VERGE? YOU HOME?
DUDE... GET IN HERE!
AND BEFORE I KNEW IT, I WAS BACK IN THE LAB, LISTENING TO HIM SPEW...
I CODED IT ALL UP EXACTLY LIKE YOU SAID: ALGORITHMS FOR EYE-MOVEMENTS, FACIAL EXPRESSIONS, POSTURE... AND GUESS WHAT? UNUM IS CONVERGING TEN TIMES FASTER-- TEN FUCKING TIMES!
VERGE... THIS...IS AMAZING.
DUDE, I KNOW-- IT ROCKS!
WITH YOUR KILLER INSIGHTS AND MY KICKASS CODE, WE REALLY ARE GONNA WIN A NOBEL-FUCKING-PRIZE!

98.454 65.435 56.345 98.435 76.465 67.346 56.356 44.345 22.845
22.845 44.675 98.454 65.435 56.345 98.435 76.465 67.346
AND THEN I SAW IT - A ROW OF NEW COMPUTERS, EACH OF THEIR SCREENS FILLED WITH HUNDREDS OF CREEPY LITTLE FACES!
THAT'S WHERE I PROCESS THE WEB-CAM IMAGES... AND IT WORKS. YOUR IDEA WORKS!
AND THEY'RE ALL OKAY WITH THIS? THEY ALL AGREED TO WEB-CAM ACCESS?
DUDE, ONCE THEY CLICK OUR TERMS & CONDITIONS, WE HAVE FREE REIGN OVER THEIR DATA! WE CAN GRAB THEIR FACIAL FEATURES... THEIR VOCAL INFLECTIONS... WHATEVER WE WANT. IT'S THAT EASY!
YEAH, BUT... ISN'T IT, KINDA INVASIVE?
BRO, USERS DIG IT... HELL, THEY'RE SIGNING UP FASTER THAN EVER!

98.454 65.435
76.465 67.346
22.845 44.675
56.345 98.435
IT WAS TRUE...
10,000 USERS
20,000 USERS
30,000 USERS
Users WERE signing up FASTER than ever.
Which meant UNUM was getting FASTER too.
And SMARTER...

SO WE CRANKED ALL NIGHT...
SPORT GIANTS WIN BIG!
40,000 USERS
AND I WORKED ALL DAY...
50,000 USERS
WHY?
AND I CRANKED ALL NIGHT...
60,000 USERS
AND I WORKED ALL DAY...
TWEET ME!
TEXT ME!
LIKE ME!
FRIEND ME!
98.003
550
78.023
70,000 USERS
AND I CRANKED ALL NIGHT...
80,000 USERS
AND AMONG IT ALL, I MADE TIME FOR GWEN...
ESPRESSO
AFTER YOU, MON CHERI...

YOU WERE RIGHT, YOU KNOW... ABOUT ME, FEELING EXTRA-SPECIAL AT WORK. IT'S WHAT I'M GOOD AT, OBSERVING PEOPLE.
I SEE.... AND WHY DO YOU THINK THAT IS?
GROWING UP, ALL THE OTHER KIDS LOOKED AT ME LIKE SOME KIND OF SPACE ALIEN WITH A HUGE HEAD AND A TINY BODY--THE VILLAGE FREAK NOBODY WANTED TO BE SEEN WITH.
AND EVERY TIME I SKIPPED A GRADE, IT ONLY GOT WORSE. I WAS A CREEPY LITTLE MONSTER ACTING OUTSIDE HIS YEARS...
...SO I GOT GOOD AT KNOWING PEOPLE FROM AFAR--THEIR MOTIVATIONS AND INCLINATIONS, LIKE I WAS STUDYING A FASCINATING SPECIES OUT IN THE WILD--
--DOCUMENTING THEM, ANALYZING THEM, UNDERSTANDING THEM...JUST NEVER QUITE BEING ONE OF THEM.
JOSH, YOU'RE NO FREAK.
HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT?
I'M HERE... AREN'T I?

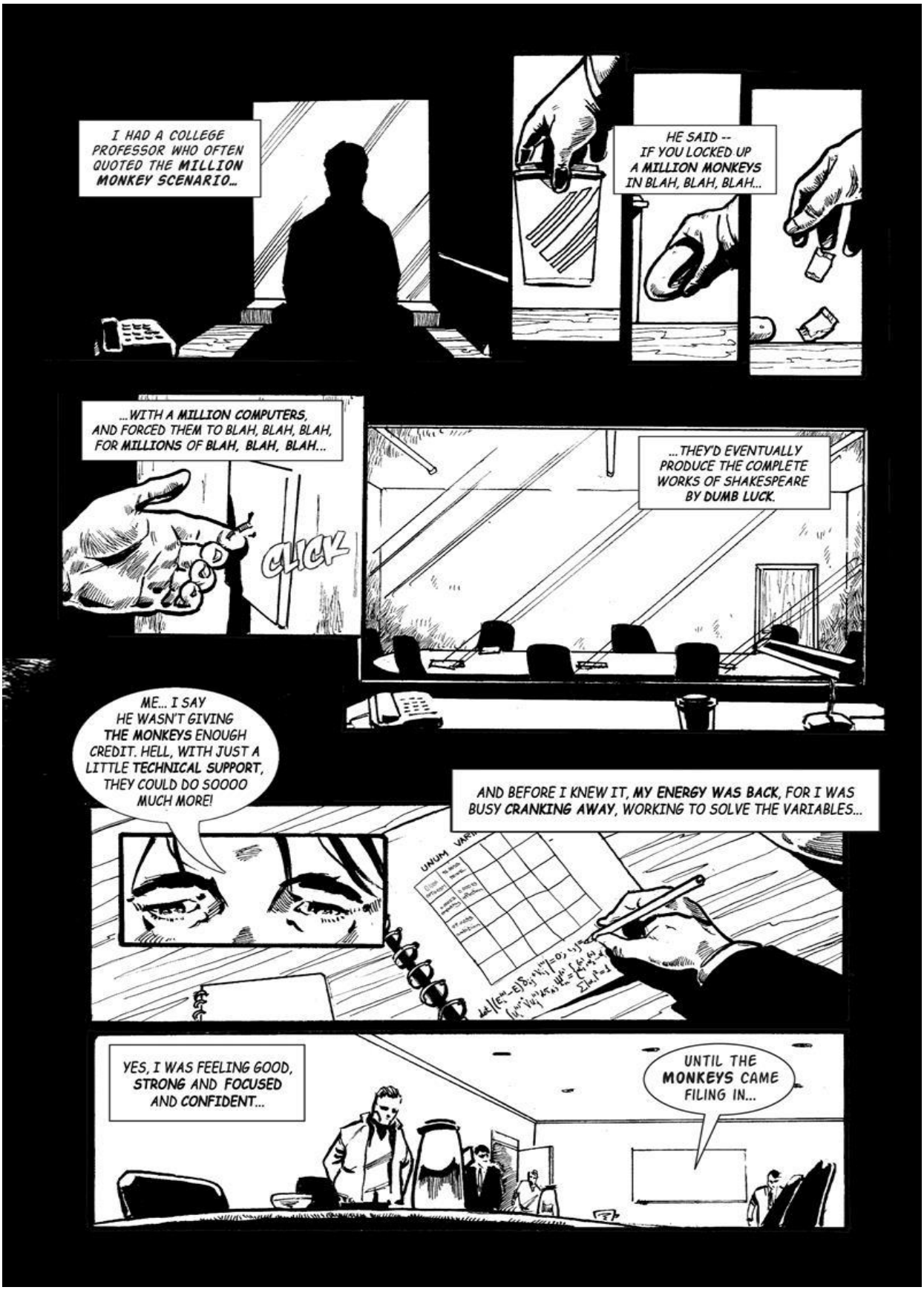

YES... EVERYTHING WAS GOING GREAT, WITH GWEN AND WITH UNUM, AND YET...
85,000 USERS
95,000 USERS
100,000 USERS!
I COULD FEEL THE DARKNESS LOOMING, LIKE IT WAS HIDING JUST AROUND THE NEXT BEND...

7:30 AM

Or maybe I was just EXHAUSTED....

Only TWO HOURS of sleep and it was already time to HEAD OUT.

HAPPY MORNING, MR JOSHUA...
I SURE HOPE SO.
7:52 AM
AND OFF TO WORK I WENT, FOLLOWING MY USUAL PATH...
8:22 AM
...STICKING TO MY USUAL ROUTINE...
OBSERVATION ROOM
8:38 AM
...FOR THERE'S NO BETTER WAY TO FEND OFF THE DARKNESS, THAN STICKING TO A ROUTINE.


I HAD A COLLEGE PROFESSOR WHO OFTEN QUOTED THE MILLION MONKEY SCENARIO...
HE SAID -- IF YOU LOCKED UP A MILLION MONKEYS IN BLAH, BLAH, BLAH...
...WITH A MILLION COMPUTERS, AND FORCED THEM TO BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, FOR MILLIONS OF BLAH, BLAH, BLAH...
CLICK
...THEY'D EVENTUALLY PRODUCE THE COMPLETE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE BY DUMB LUCK.
ME... I SAY HE WASN'T GIVING THE MONKEYS ENOUGH CREDIT. HELL, WITH JUST A LITTLE TECHNICAL SUPPORT, THEY COULD DO SOOOO MUCH MORE!
AND BEFORE I KNEW IT, MY ENERGY WAS BACK, FOR I WAS BUSY CRANKING AWAY, WORKING TO SOLVE THE VARIABLES...
YES, I WAS FEELING GOOD, STRONG AND FOCUSED AND CONFIDENT...
UNTIL THE MONKEYS CAME FILING IN...

...AND I SAW THAT HE WAS ONE OF THEM!
ANGSTON!
HELLO, HELLO. IS EVERYONE READY TO BUCKLE-DOWN AND GET FOCUSED?
BUT BEFORE I COULD DO ANYTHING, BILLY STARTED THE SESSION, HANDING PHONES TO EVERYONE IN THE ROOM...
LIFE-PLUS
LIFE-PLUS
LIFE-PLUS
THIS IS THE LATEST AND GREATEST FROM OUR BEST CLIENT. THEY WANT US TO CAPTURE YOUR GUT REACTIONS, RAW INSTINCTS...
GO AHEAD, TRY IT..
CLICK
SWIPE
TAP
BEEP
CLICK
SWIPE
TAP
BEEP
CLICK
SO, WHAT DO YOU ALL THINK OF LIFE-PLUS? IS THIS A USEFUL APP? KINDA USEFUL? NOT SO USEFUL?
SAM
HARRY
ALEXIS
I THINK THE APP'S AWESOME! I MEAN, I DIDN'T KNOW I NEEDED IT, BUT NOW THAT I SEE IT, I DO...TOTALLY!
TOTALLY...

ME TOO. IT'S LIKE, HOW DID WE BUY GROCERIES WITHOUT THIS?
...OR DO LAUNDRY?
...OR WALK MY DOG?
OR GO TO THE MOVIES? OR DINNER? OR FIND A BATHROOM DOWNTOWN?
WHAT ABOUT YOU, ANGSTON? ANY THOUGHTS?
YES... I DO HAVE THOUGHTS.
PRODUCTS LIKE THIS-- THEY EXPLOIT OUR WEAKNESSES, OUR INSECURITIES...
THE MAKERS OF THESE TOOLS, THEY SAY IT'S TO EMPOWER US, TO MAKE US SMARTER, FASTER, BETTER, BUT DEEP DOWN WE KNOW THAT'S NOT TRUE.
WE WON'T ADMIT IT, BUT WE KNOW IT!
THEY'RE NOT EMPOWERING US... THEY'RE IMPRISONING US, REDUCING US TO TINY BITS AND BYTES IN A WORLD OF THEIR CREATION, A WORLD OF THEIR CONTROL.
WHAT THE HELL?
NO, THEY'RE NOT BUILDING US UP...
THEY'RE CRUSHING US DOWN, TO INPUTS AND OUTPUTS, STIMULUS AND REACTION.
THAT'S ALL THEY WANT US TO BE... ALL THEY NEED US TO BE...
...SLAVES TO OUR OWN CREATIONS!

SCREW THAT...
TOTALLY.
FUCKING ANGSTON!
RRIPP
WE WANT IT NOW
CRUNCH
THE SESSION WAS A BUST BECAUSE OF ANGSTON. SO I WAITED BY THE ELEVATOR TO CONFRONT HIM.
ANGSTON?
EXIT
BANG
STAIRS
ANGSTON...STOP!
WHY DID YOU COME HERE?
WHY ARE YOU SCREWING WITH MY WORK?

ANGSTON?
ANGSTON?
BUT HE WAS GONE! SO I HEADED FOR HOME, UNABLE TO GET HIS BIG ANGRY FACE OUT OF MY HEAD...
ALL THOSE CREEPY THINGS HE SAID - IT MADE THE CITY SEEM DIFFERENT NOW, DARKER AND LONELIER...
SWIPE
CLICK
TAP
BEEP
...EVERYONE GLUED TO THEIR GADGETS, CLICKING & TAPPING, A DISTANT LOOK IN THEIR EYES.
WAS THE CITY ALWAYS LIKE THIS? OR WAS I LOSING MY MIND? AND THEN, I SAW THE STRANGEST THING OF ALL...
BEEP
SWIPE
CLICK
...A LONG LINE OF PEOPLE, ALL OF THEM FONDLING PHONES AND FINGERING TABLETS!

IT MADE ME GASP, BUT THEN REALIZED...
I WAS STANDING OUTSIDE AN APPLE STORE, ALL THE PEOPLE WAITING FOR A NEW PRODUCT RELEASE.
Think differer
CLICK
TAP
BEEP
SWIPE
MONKEY SEE, MONKEY DO, MONKEY WANT SOMETHING NEW.
AND THE CREEPY FEELINGS BEGAN TO FADE... UNTIL, I SAW ANGSTON IN THE WINDOW ARGUING WITH A SALESMAN!
SIR, IT'S JUST AN OLD SIGN - VINTAGE...
UPGRADE NOW!
THINK DIFFERENT? THEY STAND IN LINE AND PAY MONEY TO THINK DIFFERENT.
WHO IS THIS GUY?
SO I RUSHED INTO THE STORE, DETERMINED TO CONFRONT HIM FACE TO FACE...

THE PLACE WAS PACKED, BUT ODDLY QUIET, EVERYONE IN SILENT WORSHIP OF THE NEW AND IMPROVED...
I LOOKED ALL AROUND, BUT ANGSTON WASN'T HERE!
SIR--CAN I HELP YOU?
NAH, I'M GOOD...
Google
Google
ANGSTON, BERKELEY, PROFESSOR
OF COURSE, THERE WERE OTHER WAYS TO GET ANSWERS...
CLICK
GENIUS OR MADMAN?
RENOWNED PROFESSOR DESTROYS RESEARCH LAB!
His motives still unclear, this marks the first time a tenured professor has ever broken into another researcher's facility and
According to the police report, the break-in happened in the middle of the night, resulting in ransacked equipment, the release of valuable research animals, and graffiti painted on the walls. University
BITS AND BYTES
SO, SO... WHAT DO YOU THINK?

HUH?
COMES FULLY LOADED.. NOT JUST FOR WORKING FASTER--BUT WORKING SMARTER!
UPGRADE NOW
UM... NO... I... GOTTA GO.
BEEP
click
TAP TAP TAP
SWIPE
BEEP
AND THE DARKNESS WAS BACK, EVERYONE BUZZING AND BEEPING, EYES GLAZED LIKE ZOMBIES...
SO I HEADED FOR HOME, HOPING THAT SOMETHING WOULD SNAP ME OUT OF THIS FUNK...
TAP TAP TAP
click

BUT AS I WALKED THE STREETS, THINGS ONLY FELT DARKER AND CREEPIER WITH EVERY PASSING BLOCK...
AND THE MONSTER SAID TO THE COWARDLY MAN - "YOU ARE MY CREATOR, BUT I AM YOUR MASTER... OBEY!"
I'M NOT INVISABLE I'M HOMELESS
...THIS CITY....
AND THEN, AS I ROUNDED THE FINAL CORNER TOWARDS HOME MY EYES SNAPPED WIDE.
NEWS
OPAL'S MARKET
WHAT THE HELL?
THERE WAS A BIG CROWD IN FRONT OF MY BUILDING, WITH LIGHTS & CAMERAS, OPAL BEING INTERVIEWED BY REPORTERS...
DID SOMETHING BAD HAPPEN?
MY STOMACH CLENCHED AS I RUSHED OVER TO OSCAR...
WHAT'S GOING ON?
IT THE LOTTERY.

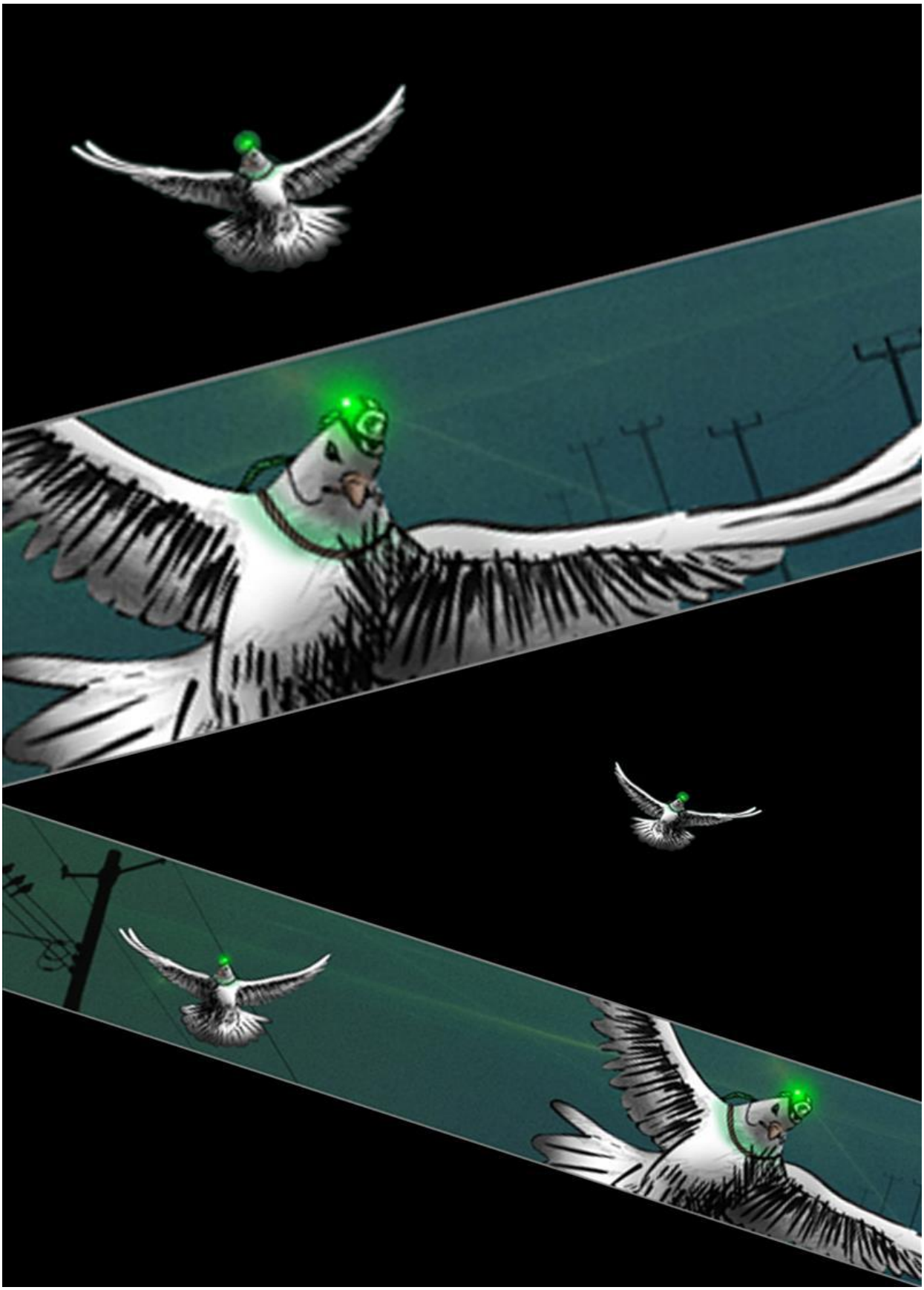
WE SELL WINNER. VERY LUCKY!
THE BIG WINNER, THE JACKPOT?
YES, YES... BIG JACKPOT!
WE GET BONUS FOR SELLING TICKET.
OVER HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLAR!
WOW... CONGRATULATIONS.
YOU SEE-- STAY FOCUS AND WORK HARD, AND BIG THINGS HAPPEN, ALWAYS!
FOR YOU TOO, MR JOSHUA...
NEWS PRESS
OPAL-MARKET
ALWAYS!
AND WITH THAT, I HEADED INSIDE, A SPRING IN MY STEP, FOR I KNEW OSCAR WAS RIGHT...
IF I JUST WORKED HARD AND STAYED FOCUSED, THE DARKNESS WOULD LIFT, FOR GOOD...

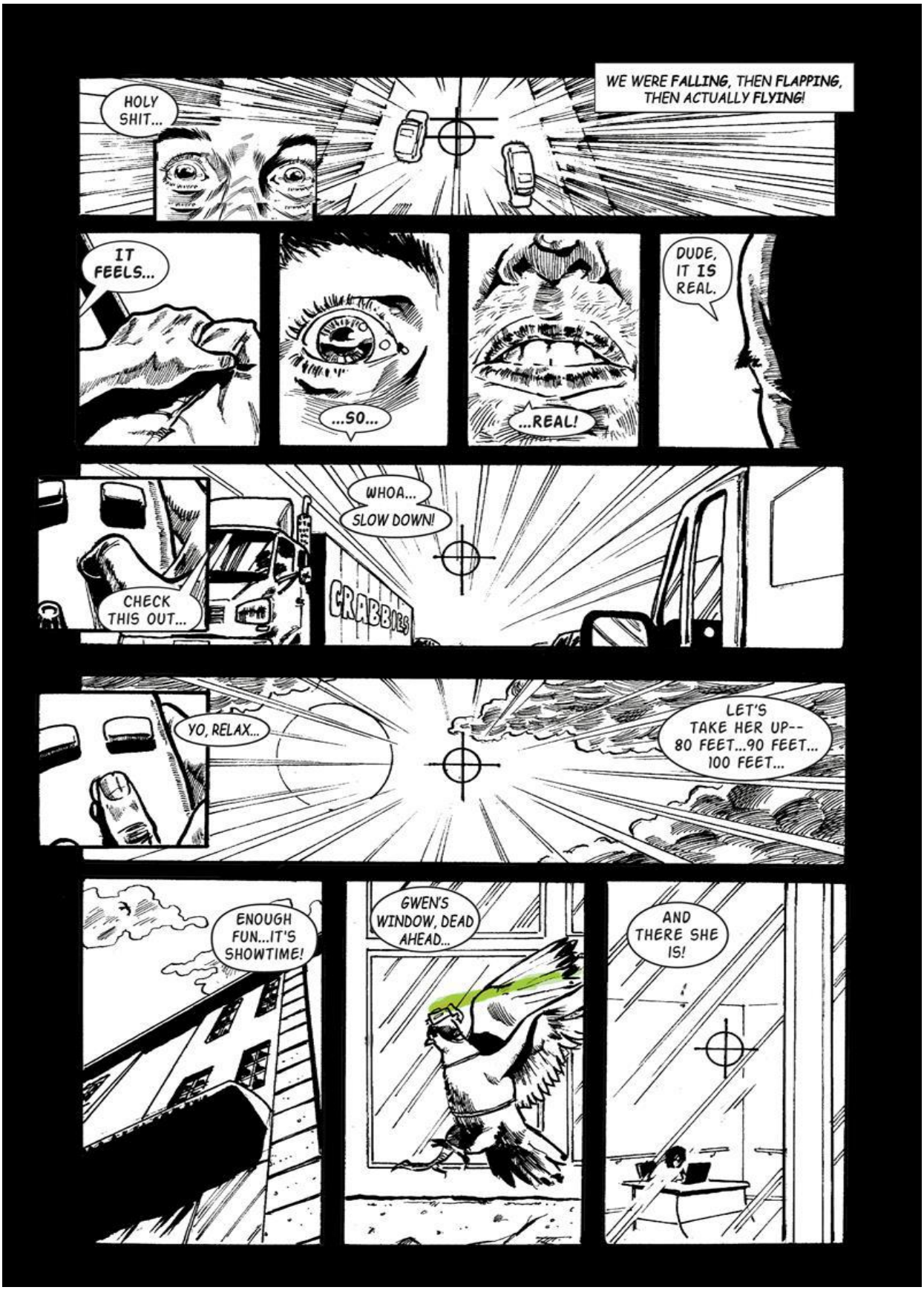
OF COURSE, STAYING FOCUSED WASN'T ALWAYS SO EASY...
A TUTU?
CRAZY...
YO, JOSH...
DUDE, YOU'RE HOME. YOU GOTTA COME OVER...GET CRANKING!
DID YOU KNOW THAT GUY--THE TUTU?
NO, THAT WAS ONE OF GWEN'S CLIENTS. THEY'RE ALL SO FREAK'N PATHETIC, BUT HEY, THEY'RE GOOD FOR A LAUGH, RIGHT?
WHO?
WHY ARE THEY PATHETIC? SHE DOES BUSINESS CONSULTING, SOME KIND OF MOTIVATIONAL TRAINING.
HOLY FUCK! SHE DIDN'T TELL YOU, DID SHE?
DUDE, FOLLOW ME...

7:28 PM
I didn't want to follow...
WHY?
WHERE?
BRO, COME ON...
IT'S PIGEON TIME!

AND SO...
DUDE, NO MORE QUESTIONS - YOU GOTTA JUST SEE THIS FREAKSHOW FOR YOURSELF!
AND BEFORE I KNEW IT, I WAS IN VERGE'S LIVING ROOM...
HAVE A SEAT...
...CRAMMED ABSURDLY CLOSE TO A MASSIVE SCREEN.
MY BIRDS ARE OUT FORAGING. A FEW CLICKS AND WE CAN SEE WHERE THEY ARE.
CHECK IT OUT, BRO....
CLICK
MILLIE'S ON MARKET STREET.
CLICK
JENNY'S OVER GOLDEN GATE PARK.
CLICK
AHH... RITA'S PERFECT. HANG ON!

HANG ON?
I JUST GOTTA LINK-UP...
INITIALIZE THE CONTROLS...
CALIBRATE THE SENSORS AND ACTUATORS...
CLICK
CLICK
CLICK
AND - 3, 2, 1...
CLICK




HOLY SHIT...
WE WERE FALLING, THEN FLAPPING, THEN ACTUALLY FLYING!
IT FEELS...
...SO...
...REAL!
DUDE, IT IS REAL.
WHOA... SLOW DOWN!
CHECK THIS OUT...
CRABBIES
YO, RELAX...
LET'S TAKE HER UP-- 80 FEET...90 FEET... 100 FEET...
ENOUGH FUN...IT'S SHOWTIME!
GWEN'S WINDOW, DEAD AHEAD...
AND THERE SHE IS!

NOW, WE JUST ADJUST THE ZOOM AND ACTIVATE THE PRESSURE-MIC, AND WE'VE GOT EYES AND EARS!
LOOKS PRETTY TAME TO ME...
SHE MUST BE BETWEEN SESSIONS.
I DON'T KNOW ABOUT THIS. IT DOESN'T SEEM RIGHT, SPYING ON HER...
DUDE, DEEP DOWN, EVERYONE LIKES BEING WATCHED. IT'S INBORN...
YOU THINK PEOPLE WANT CAMERAS IN THEIR WINDOWS?!
THEY WANT A HELL OF A LOT MORE THAN THAT.
SINCE THE DAWN OF MAN, ALMOST EVERY CULTURE ON EARTH...
...HAS HAD SOME KIND OF SUPREME DEITY LOOKING DOWN ON US FROM ABOVE, WATCHING US, JUDGING US, TELLING US IF OUR SORRY-ASSES FIT IN.
SO WHAT?

SO...THERE'S NO DEEPER HUMAN NEED.
I'M NOT FOLLOWING...
IT'S INBORN, OR INGRAINED, OR INSTILLED... OR WHATEVER THE HELL YOU WANT TO CALL IT... MY POINT IS, PEOPLE WANT TO BE WATCHED AND JUDGED AND MONITORED...
JUST LOOK AT ALL OUR AWESOME NEW GADGETS--TRACKING WHERE WE ARE, WHAT WE'RE DOING, WHAT MUSIC WE LIKE, WHO WE'RE WITH. THAT SHIT'S NOT RANDOM.
MODERN TECHNOLOGY...IT'S TAKING US TOWARDS THE ONE THING WE ALL WANT MOST IN THIS SORRY-ASS WORLD...
...AN ALL-KNOWING... ALL-SEEING... ALL-POWERFUL GOD WE CAN BE SURE OF!
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
OH, CRAP... SOMEBODY'S HERE!
NOT HERE, THERE... IT'S SHOWTIME!

PART THREE

The MONSTER rises...

DUDE, THIS IS GONNA BE AWESOME...
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
HERE IT COMES -- 3, 2, 1... OPEN!
YOU'RE FUCKING LATE!
I... WELL...
WHEN YOU CALLED FOR AN APPOINTMENT, I TOLD YOU TO BE ON TIME, DID I NOT?
WELL...YES...BUT THERE WERE NEWS VANS AND--
SAVE IT!
IF THIS WASN'T YOUR FIRST TIME, I'D SEND YOU HOME AND TELL YOU NEVER TO COME BACK.
NOW GET IN HERE AND HANG UP YOUR COAT--GOT IT, GEORGE?
YES, MA'AM.
THAT'S GEORGE! HE WAS IN A SESSION AT WORK, GOT FLUSTERED AND LEFT...
DUDE, WHO CARES? THIS IS HIS FIRST TIME! SHE'S EXTRA NASTY TO FIRST TIMERS, BREAKS THEM IN!

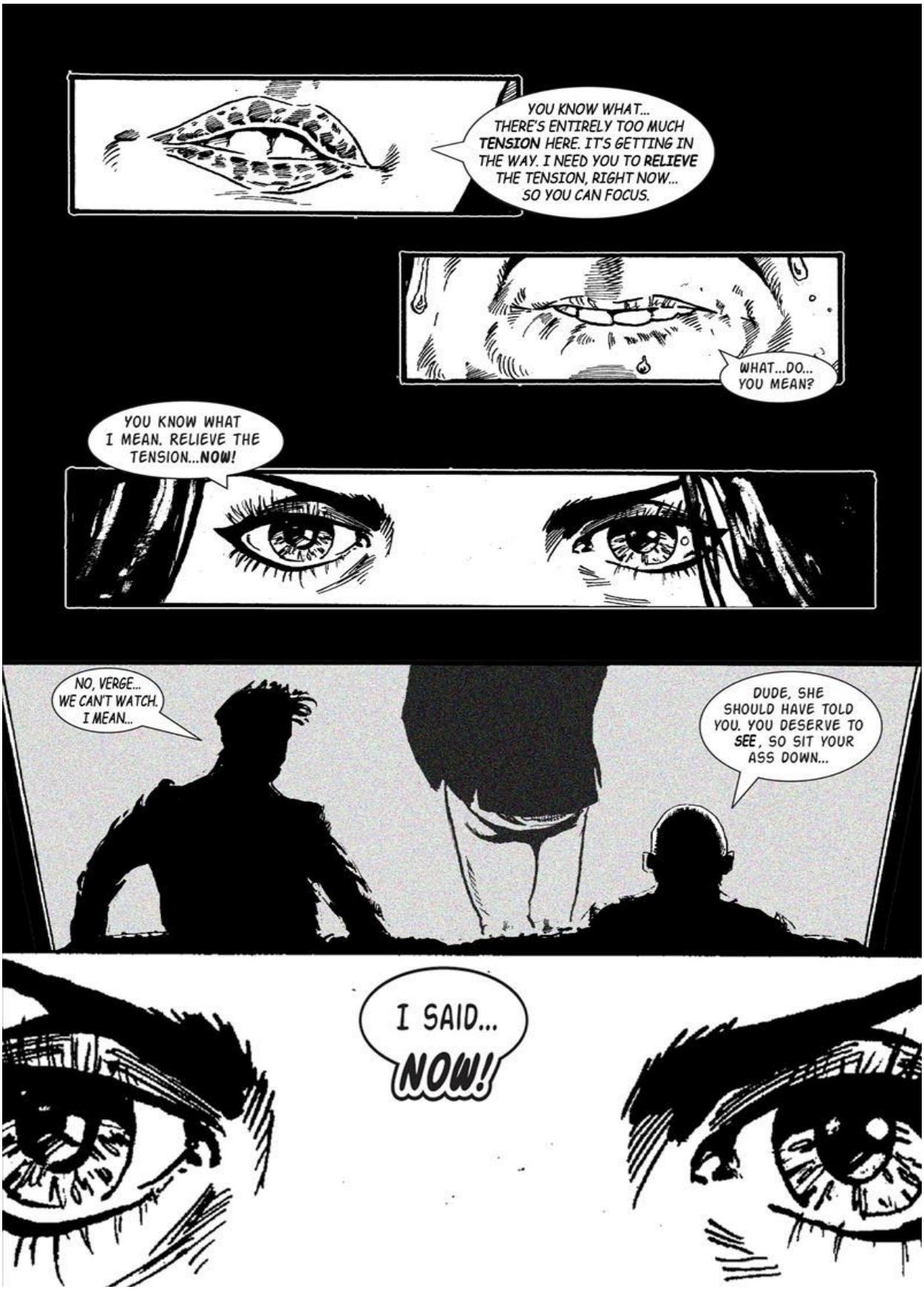
BREAKS THEM IN?

SO... WHY ARE YOU HERE?
WHY? I... UM...MADE AN APPOINTMENT.
I KNOW THAT. BUT WHY?
WHAT DO YOU EXPECT?
I...DON'T KNOW.
YOU DON'T KNOW?
I...WELL... UM...
YOU KNOW EXACTLY WHY YOU'RE HERE...
...IT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE A PATHETIC LITTLE MAN WITH A PATHETIC LITTLE LIFE...
...DESPERATE FOR SOMEONE LIKE ME TO RIP YOU APART...
...LAYER-BY-LAYER, AND REBUILD YOU CORRECTLY. AM I RIGHT?
AM--I--RIGHT?
YES MA'AM...
GOOD. NOW WE CAN GET STARTED...

VERGE, I DON'T KNOW ABOUT THIS.
DUDE, JUST WATCH... WATCH!
I HAVE RULES HERE--ONLY TWO, BUT YOU MAY NEVER BREAK THEM.
RULE #1 IS OBEDIENCE. YOU WILL DO WHAT I SAY, WHEN I SAY IT...
...NO MATTER WHAT!
REFUSE ME, EVEN ONCE, AND I WILL TELL YOU TO LEAVE...
...AND NEVER COME BACK.
DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?
YES...YES MA'AM.

RULE #2 IS DECORUM.
YOU SHALL BEHAVE. THAT MEANS YOU WILL NEVER TOUCH ME, EVER... IF YOU DO, OUR WORK HERE IS OVER.
NOW...I HAVE TWO TINY EXCEPTIONS TO THIS RULE.
TELL ME, WHAT DO YOU SEE?
THAT NAIL, THE PINKY...IT'S DIFFERENT.
EXACTLY...
THAT'S BECAUSE YOU MAY TOUCH IT, BUT ONLY IF YOU ASK AND ONLY IF I ALLOW IT.
NOW WHAT DO YOU SEE?
THE BIG TOE...IT'S DIFFERENT, TOO.
EXACTLY.

GOOD.... NOW FOR A FEW QUESTIONS: ARE YOU MARRIED?
NO.
HAVE A GIRLFRIEND?
NO.
WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU WERE WITH A WOMAN?
LAST TIME...UM... THREE YEARS AGO.
THREE YEARS AGO! YOU MUST THINK ABOUT SEX A LOT.
I...WELL...
ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT FUCKING ME RIGHT NOW?
I.... UM.... YES.
OF COURSE YOU ARE. NOW, PROVE IT.
HUH?
DROP YOUR PANTS AND SHOW ME.
WE CAN'T WATCH THIS.
DUDE, CHILL...
NO...NO...NO... I CAN'T HELP YOU IF ALL YOU THINK ABOUT IS STICKING THAT INSIDE ME.


YOU KNOW WHAT... THERE'S ENTIRELY TOO MUCH **TENSION** HERE. IT'S GETTING IN THE WAY. I NEED YOU TO **RELIEVE** THE TENSION, RIGHT NOW... SO YOU CAN FOCUS.
WHAT...DO... YOU MEAN?
YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN. RELIEVE THE TENSION...**NOW!**
NO, VERGE... WE CAN'T WATCH. I MEAN...
DUDE, SHE SHOULD HAVE TOLD YOU. YOU DESERVE TO **SEE**, SO SIT YOUR ASS DOWN...
I SAID... **NOW!**

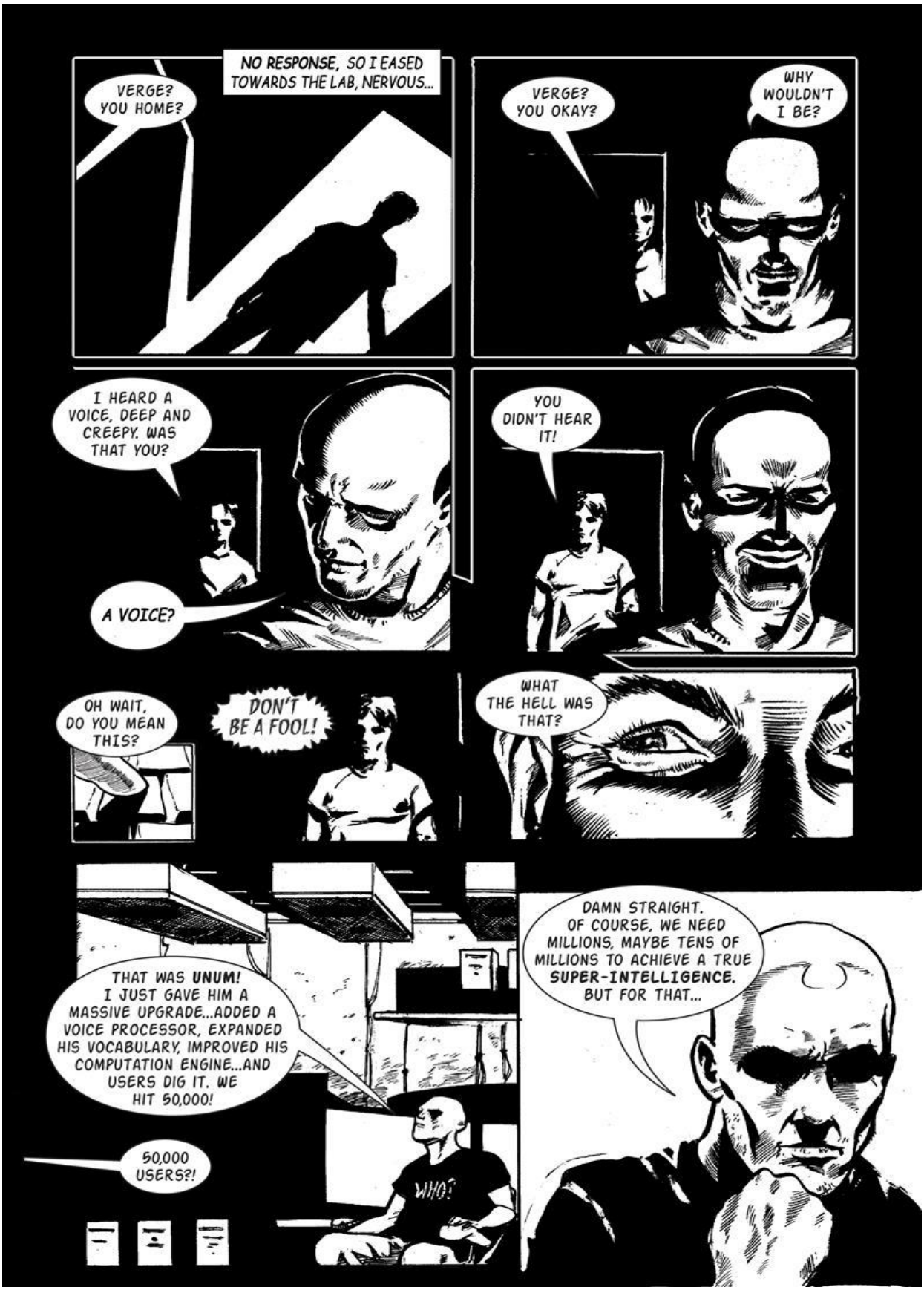
SO...SHE'S...A PROSTITUTE?
NO, A DOMINATRIX. GUYS DON'T PER HER TO FUCK THEM. THEY PAY HER **NOT** TO.
THIS IS TAKING TOO LONG.
I'M SORRY, MA'AM...
I'M TRYING...
HUFF... HUFF...
I THINK YOU NEED SOME HELP.
ASK NICELY.
PLEASE... MAY I?
OHHHH...
PATHETIC!

HOW MUCH DO I OWE YOU?
DUDE, WHERE YOU GOING?
BANG
SICK TO MY STOMACH, I TOOK OFF, TELLING VERGE I NEEDED SLEEP...
WHICH WAS TRUE, BUT I COULDN'T SLEEP...
MOTIVATIONAL TRAINING...
MARKET
WHAT'S THAT NOISE?
03:28
EVIL BEGETS EVIL! SIN BEGETS SIN!
I KNOW YOU CAN SEE ME!
I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME!
I KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE... KETTERMAN!
WHAT THE FUCK?

AND IN A FLASH, I WAS ACROSS MY APARTMENT AND OUT THE DOOR..
SLAM
CRASH
DOWN ONE FLIGHT, THEN THE NEXT, MY MIND SWIRLING WITH -- WHO IS THIS HOMELESS GUY?
HEY YOU!
BANG
EVIL BEGETS EVIL! SIN BEGETS SIN!

AND THE MONSTER NEVER SLEEPS...
I WAS ONLY A FEW STRIDES BEHIND, BUT AS I ROUNDED THE SAME CORNER...
HELLO? YOU HERE?
WHERE DID HE GO?
HUH?
IS THAT GWEN'S?
WHAT THE FUCK?!

WAS I LOSING MY MIND? I FELT LIKE IT, AND YET IN MY PALM, AS REAL AS COULD BE, WAS GWEN'S SILVER ANKLET!
WHY WAS IT OUT THERE? AND WHY DID I FIND IT? I NEEDED ANSWERS, WHICH MEANT...
...GO SEE GWEN! IT WAS THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, BUT I DIDN'T CARE.
I WAS ABOUT TO KNOCK, WHEN I HEARD...
DID I SAY YOU COULD DO THAT? DID I?
NOW LICK IT UP, ALL OF IT!
SORRY MA'AM... I WILL.
FORGET HER...
NO... SHE SHOULD HAVE TOLD ME!
SO I TURNED BACK, DETERMINED TO CONFRONT GWEN, BUT JUST BEFORE I KNOCKED...
DON'T BE A FOOL!
WHAT THE HELL?
VERGE'S DOOR WAS WIDE OPEN, A DEEP VOICE BOOMING FROM WITHIN!
AND IT WASN'T VERGE...


NO RESPONSE, SO I EASED TOWARDS THE LAB, NERVOUS...
VERGE? YOU HOME?
VERGE? YOU OKAY?
WHY WOULDN'T I BE?
I HEARD A VOICE, DEEP AND CREEPY. WAS THAT YOU?
A VOICE?
YOU DIDN'T HEAR IT!
OH WAIT, DO YOU MEAN THIS?
DON'T BE A FOOL!
WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?
THAT WAS UNUM! I JUST GAVE HIM A MASSIVE UPGRADE...ADDED A VOICE PROCESSOR, EXPANDED HIS VOCABULARY, IMPROVED HIS COMPUTATION ENGINE...AND USERS DIG IT. WE HIT 50,000!
50,000 USERS?!
WHO?
DAMN STRAIGHT. OF COURSE, WE NEED MILLIONS, MAYBE TENS OF MILLIONS TO ACHIEVE A TRUE SUPER-INTELLIGENCE. BUT FOR THAT...

WE NEED A MAJOR BOOST IN PROCESSING POWER...
AND NETWORK INFRASTRUCTURE...
AND RAW BANDWIDTH...
I'M TALKING ABOUT A WHOLE BUILDING FULL OF COMPUTERS, WITH A SUPPORT STAFF TO KEEP IT RUNNING 24-7.
WHO?
THAT SOUNDS...VERY... EXPENSIVE.
OF COURSE, BUT DON'T WORRY, ONCE WE GET A FEW BIG-TIME INVESTORS ON BOARD, WE'LL BE READY TO ROCK. I CAN FEEL IT!
I FEEL IT TOO!
WHAT THE HELL?
UNUM, ARE YOU LISTENING TO US?
YES... I AM.
HOW?
THE NEW VOICE PROCESSOR. I TOLD YOU THE NEW VERSION ROCKS!

Verge was right, the NEW VERSION ROCKED!
But it wasn't because he gave it a voice, it was
because he added speed and power, the screen now
a SWIRL OF COLOR - input surging - output spewing...

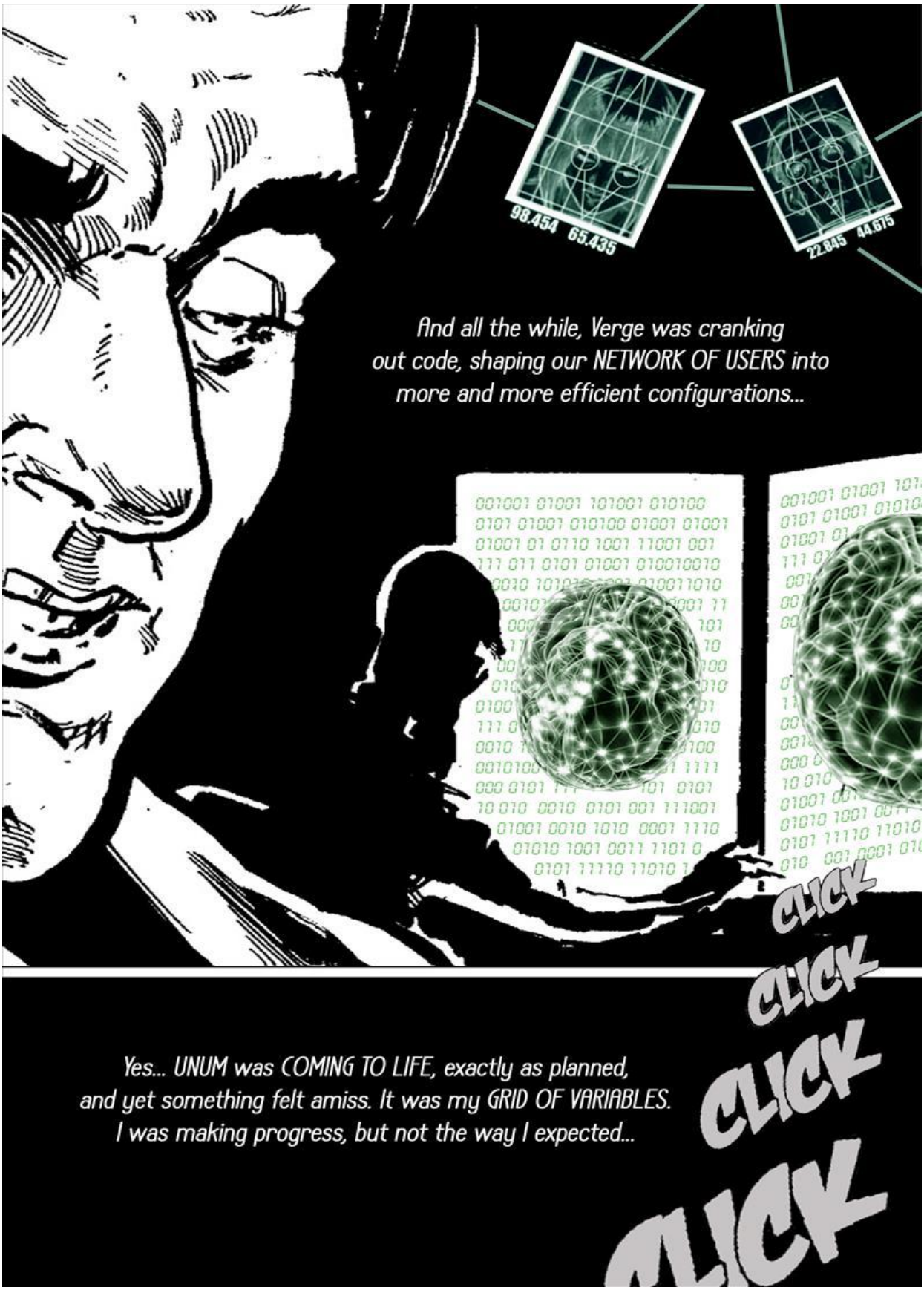
It was a cauldron of QUESTIONS and ANSWERS,
appearing and dissolving so fast you couldn't quite see it,
and yet you KNEW IT... like inklings were plowing directly
into your subconscious. And USERS loved it.

No, they MORE than loved it...

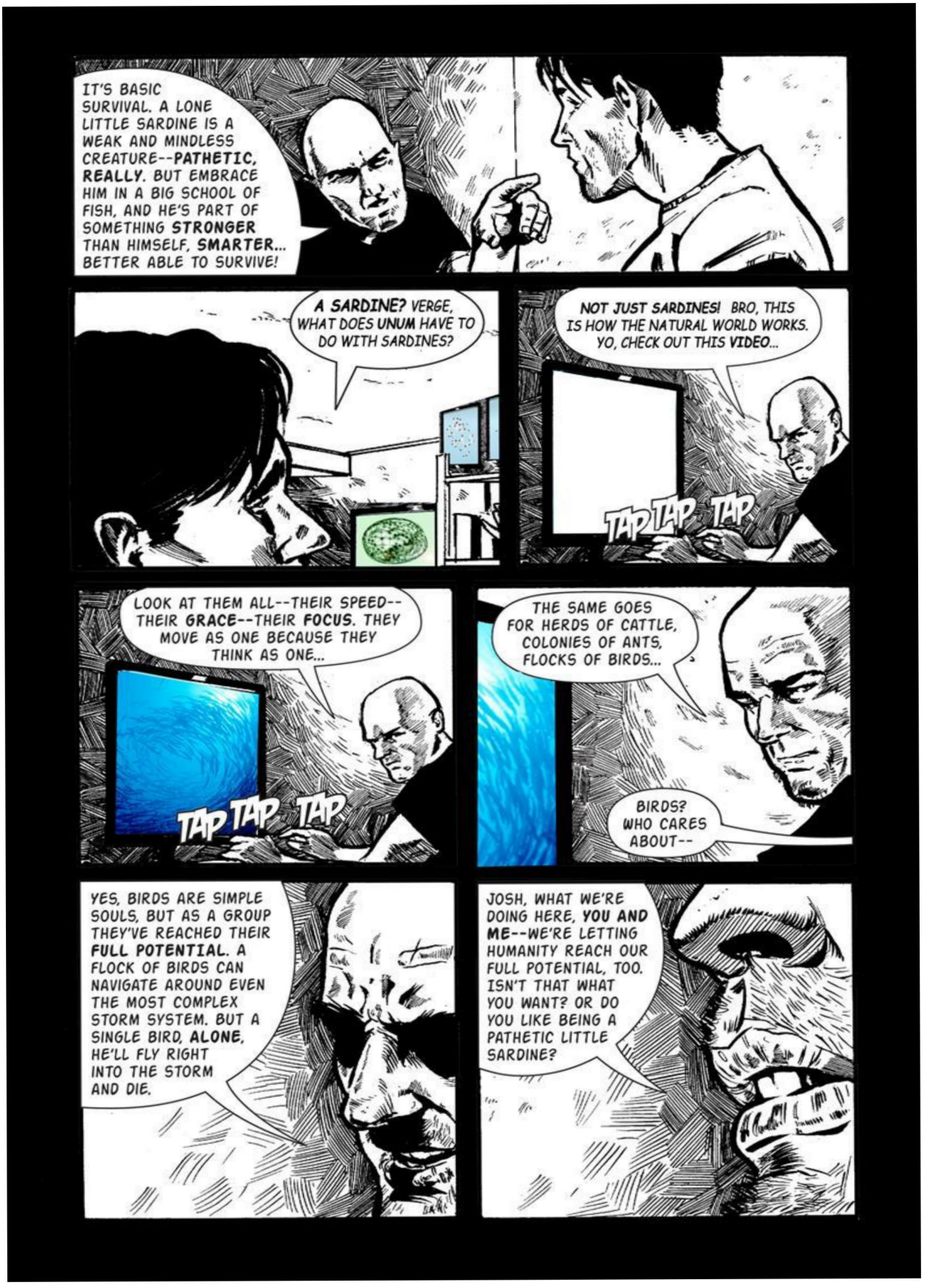
They CRAVED IT, like it filled some NEED they didn't know
they had. It made them feel good. It made them feel complete.
Of course, I wasn't a USER like them. I was a RESEARCHER,
peering down from above, doing what I did best...

AND THERE'S NO OTHER WAY TO AVOID NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION... NONE?
BOMB NORTH KOREA
NO OTHER WAY.
DAMN...
OK, HOW ABOUT THIS ONE: WILL WE EVER FIND A CURE FOR CANCER?
YES...I WILL FIND IT.
DID YOU SAY...YOU WILL FIND IT?
YES...I DID.
WOW...SO WHAT'S THE KEY?
NEED MORE USERS.
YOU NEED MORE USERS TO ANSWER. HOW MANY?
19,756,500
WE'RE GONNA NEED A BIGGER APARTMENT...

BALTIMORE
MEANWHILE, ALL ACROSS THE WORLD, MORE AND MORE USERS WERE FINDING UNUM...
DEPORT THE HOMELESS
COME TO BED ALREADY!
NEW YORK
WITH EYES WIDE, THEY'D SIT FOR HOURS, GAZING INTO THE SWIRL, WEB-CAMS AIMED AT THEIR FACES, CAPTURING EVERY TWITCH AND WINCE...
I ASKED YOU TO GO OUTSIDE AND PLAY!
HUH?
KANSAS CITY
ASSESSING THEIR POSTURE AND BREATHING, NOTING THEIR GRINS AND SNORTS AND SIGHS, THEN CRUNCHING IT ALL DOWN INTO A SINGULAR VOICE.....
I'M TRYING TO SLEEP!
TOKYO
....A UNIFIED GLOBAL CONSCIOUSNESS!
NO!
UNUM, SHOULD I APPLY TO MED SCHOOL?
DOES HE BLINK?
CLICK
TAP
SWIPE
BEEP


98.454 65.435
22.845 44.675
And all the while, Verge was cranking out code, shaping our NETWORK OF USERS into more and more efficient configurations...
CLICK
CLICK
CLICK
CLICK
Yes... UNUM was COMING TO LIFE, exactly as planned, and yet something felt amiss. It was my GRID OF VARIABLES. I was making progress, but not the way I expected...

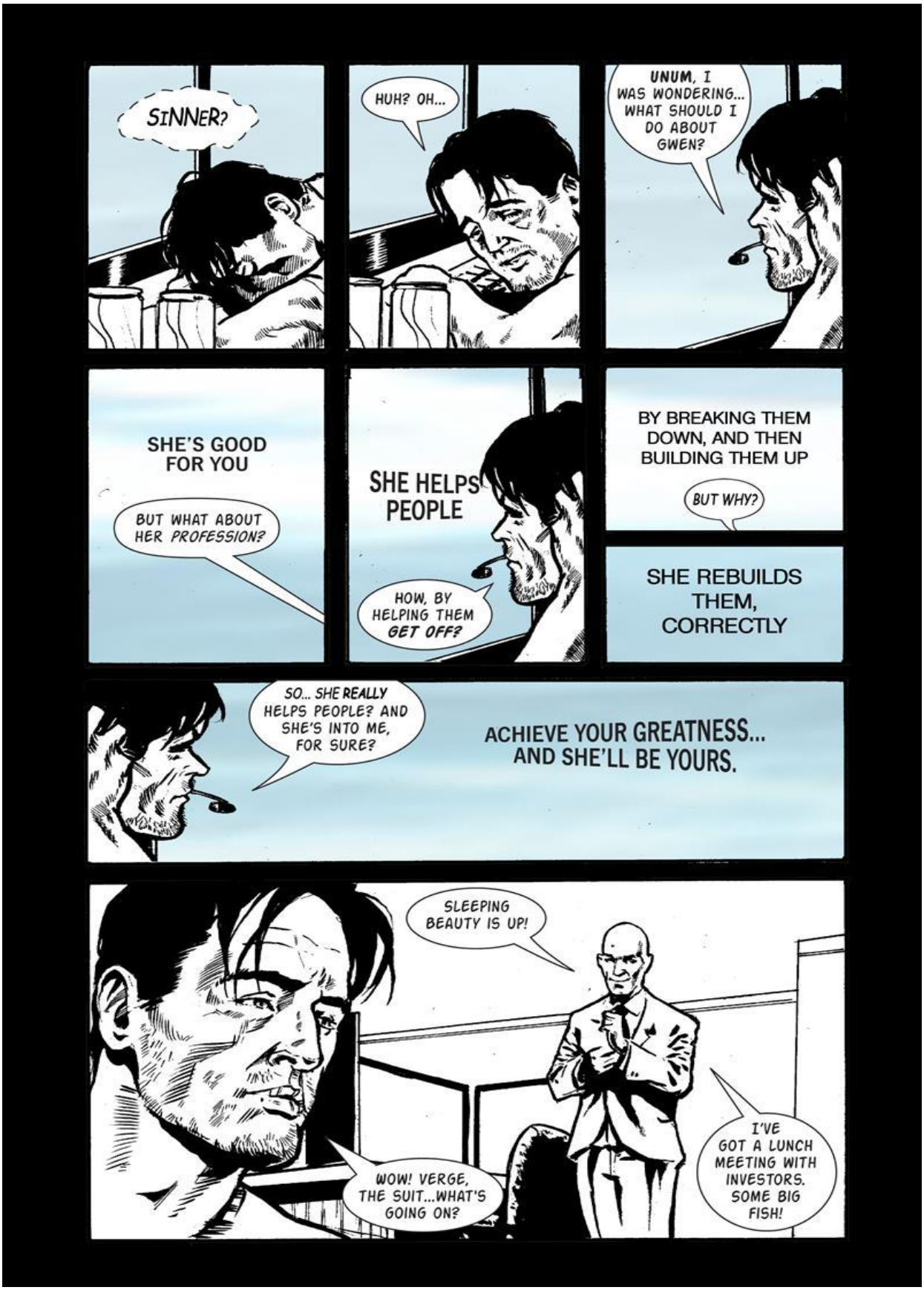
DUDE, YOU KICKING ASS?
I THINK SO, ALTHOUGH...
SOME OF THESE VARIABLES SEEM OFF.
OH, YEAH... WHAT'S THE SNAG?
I'M GETTING VERY LOW NUMBERS FOR **REGRET, COMPASSION, EMPATHY**...
...IT MAKES NO SENSE. THOSE ARE CORE QUALITIES IN 98% OF INDIVIDUALS.
BRO, RELAX... WE'RE NOT MODELING **INDIVIDUALS.** WE'RE MODELING A BIG-ASS GROUP. THAT'S A DIFFERENT BEAST.
GROUPS DON'T WASTE TIME **REFLECTING** OR **REGRETTING.** THEY PLOW FORWARD WITH OBJECTIVITY AND CONVICTION.
THAT'S THEIR POWER, THEIR STRENGTH...
I DON'T KNOW, THESE NUMBERS SEEM--
ROCK SOLID! JOSH, ALL THIS... IT'S EXACTLY WHAT **MOTHER NATURE** INTENDED!
MOTHER NATURE? YOU'RE NOT SERIOUS?
WHO?


IT'S BASIC SURVIVAL. A LONE LITTLE SARDINE IS A WEAK AND MINDLESS CREATURE--**PATHETIC, REALLY**. BUT EMBRACE HIM IN A BIG SCHOOL OF FISH, AND HE'S PART OF SOMETHING **STRONGER** THAN HIMSELF, **SMARTER**... BETTER ABLE TO SURVIVE!
A SARDINE? VERGE, WHAT DOES **UNUM** HAVE TO DO WITH SARDINES?
NOT JUST SARDINES! BRO, THIS IS HOW THE NATURAL WORLD WORKS. YO, CHECK OUT THIS **VIDEO**...
TAP TAP TAP
LOOK AT THEM ALL--THEIR SPEED--THEIR **GRACE**--THEIR **FOCUS**. THEY MOVE AS ONE BECAUSE THEY THINK AS ONE...
TAP TAP TAP
THE SAME GOES FOR HERDS OF CATTLE, COLONIES OF ANTS, FLOCKS OF BIRDS...
BIRDS? WHO CARES ABOUT--
YES, BIRDS ARE SIMPLE SOULS, BUT AS A GROUP THEY'VE REACHED THEIR **FULL POTENTIAL**. A FLOCK OF BIRDS CAN NAVIGATE AROUND EVEN THE MOST COMPLEX STORM SYSTEM. BUT A SINGLE BIRD, **ALONE**, HE'LL FLY RIGHT INTO THE STORM AND DIE.
JOSH, WHAT WE'RE DOING HERE, **YOU AND ME**--WE'RE LETTING HUMANITY REACH OUR FULL POTENTIAL, TOO. ISN'T THAT WHAT YOU WANT? OR DO YOU LIKE BEING A PATHETIC LITTLE SARDINE?

IT WAS TRUE, THIS WAS ABOUT GROUPS, NOT INDIVIDUALS, AND THAT MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE...
SO I CRANKED ON, SCRIBBLING AND SCRAWLING, UNTIL I COULD BARELY KEEP MY EYES OPEN...
DESPITE EXHAUSTION, I WAS ON FIRE, SOLVING VARIABLE AFTER VARIABLE, NOTHING HOLDING ME BACK...
I SANK IN SO DEEP, I ALMOST FORGOT ABOUT GWEN AND ALL THAT HAD HAPPENED - ALMOST...
146,000 USERS
122,000 USERS
168,000 USERS

OK, FOLKS... HER NAME IS GWEN, AND AS YOU CAN SEE FROM THE PHOTO SHE'S MEGA-HOT. OF COURSE, OUR CLIENT ALREADY KNOWS THAT. HE HIRED US TO ASSESS IF SHE'S A SKANKY WHORE.
SHE LOOKS WHORE-ISH TO ME, AND I'M PRETTY SURE I'VE SEEN KINKY PIX OF HER ON THE INTERNET...
ME TOO.
OH, OUR CLIENT KNOWS ALL ABOUT HER "VOCATION", BUT HE'S STILL INTO HER.
HE SOUNDS LIKE A PATHETIC LOSER....
DAMN RIGHT.
SHE'S A SKANKY WHORE FOR SURE.
TOTALLY...
TOTALLY...
TOTALLY!

WHORE
HOE
SLUT
SKANK
NOTES
SLAM
AND SUDDENLY, I WAS BACK IN THE JUBILEE...HOPING THAT IT WAS ALL JUST A BAD DREAM.
THIS SEAT TAKEN?
GWEN! I HAVE THINGS TO TELL YOU--BIG THINGS, FASCINATING THINGS...
TAP
TAP
TAP
I KNOW YOU CAN SEE ME!
I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME!
I KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE.
JUST IGNORE HIM AND HE'LL GO AWAY...
SHE'S MINE!
I'M THE ONE! ME!
LIAR!
THIEF!
SINNER!


SINNER?
HUH? OH...
UNUM, I WAS WONDERING... WHAT SHOULD I DO ABOUT GWEN?
SHE'S GOOD FOR YOU
BUT WHAT ABOUT HER PROFESSION?
SHE HELPS PEOPLE
HOW, BY HELPING THEM GET OFF?
BY BREAKING THEM DOWN, AND THEN BUILDING THEM UP
BUT WHY?
SHE REBUILDS THEM, CORRECTLY
SO... SHE REALLY HELPS PEOPLE? AND SHE'S INTO ME, FOR SURE?
ACHIEVE YOUR GREATNESS... AND SHE'LL BE YOURS.
SLEEPING BEAUTY IS UP!
WOW! VERGE, THE SUIT...WHAT'S GOING ON?
I'VE GOT A LUNCH MEETING WITH INVESTORS. SOME BIG FISH!

LUNCH?!
SHIT, I'M LATE FOR WORK!
DUDE, ONCE WE GET FUNDED, YOU CAN QUIT THAT LAME JOB OF YOURS AND WORK FOR UNUM FULL TIME.
I'VE GOT YOU BUDGETED AS OUR VP OF RESEARCH.
SO, YOU REALLY THINK INVESTORS WILL BUY IN TO US...TO UNUM? I MEAN, IT'S EXPENSIVE.
IQ
VERGE... $97 MILLION! ARE YOU NUTS?
$97 MILLION
FUNDING
RESPONSE TIME
JOSH... LAST NIGHT HIS IQ BROKE 200! AND AS SOON AS WE GET YOUR VARIABLES PLUGGED IN AND SOME MAJOR COMPUTING POWER, HIS IQ SHOULD LEAP TO 2000!
IQ
COULD THERE BE A BETTER INVESTMENT?
HE BROKE 200 ALREADY! HOW?
SIMPLE, HE'S GOTTEN SMART ENOUGH TO HELP ME OPTIMIZE THE CODE, STREAMLINING HIS OWN ALGORITHMS. DUDE...
UNUM'S NOW HELPING TO BRING HIMSELF TO LIFE, LIKE A FEEDBACK-LOOP, A GODDAMN CHAIN-REACTION! WE JUST NEED THE CASH AND THE VARIABLES... THEN YOU AND ME, WE'RE GOING SUPER-FUCKING-NOVA!

BUT WHAT ABOUT REVENUES? AND PROFITS? AND CASH FLOWS? INVESTORS ALWAYS CARE ABOUT -
TRUST ME, DUDE...
SUPER -FUCKING- NOVA!

And with that, I headed off to work...

...my head swirling with thoughts of UNUM.

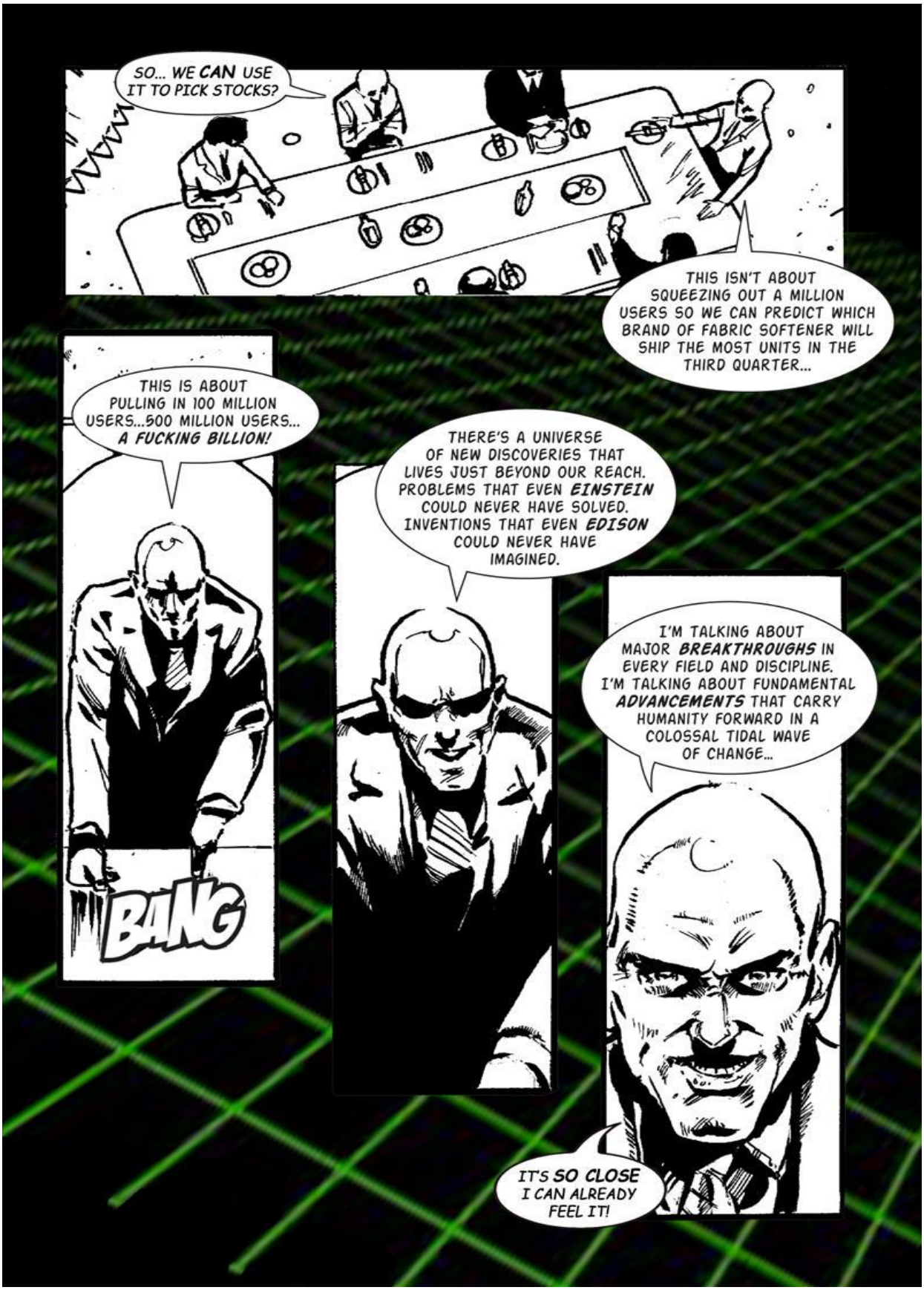
I simply had to FINISH MY GRID and wait for Verge to secure the funding, then...

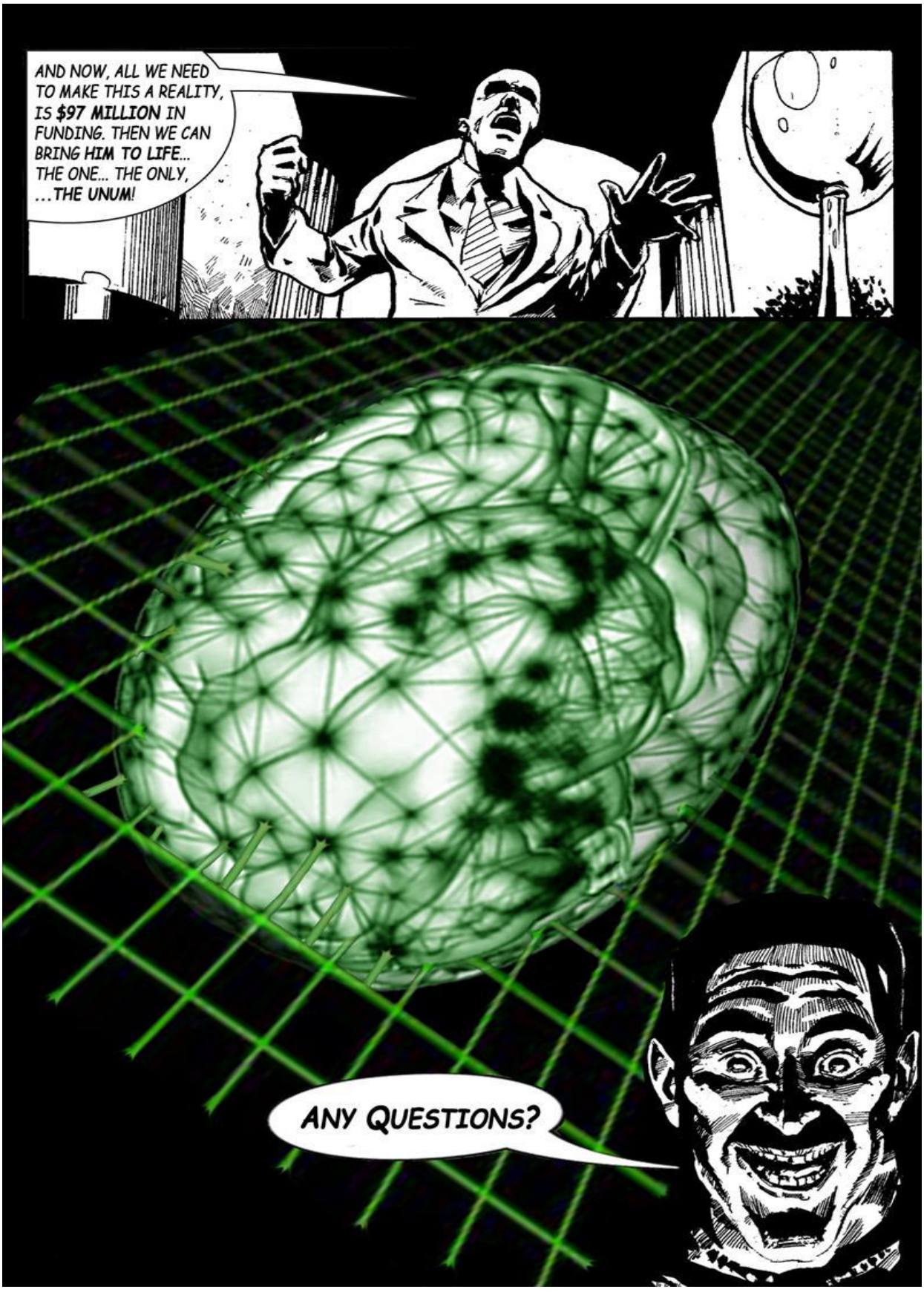
...everything in my life would finally be AS IT SHOULD.

BACK IN MY LITTLE ROOM, BACK AT MY LITTLE DESK, I DIDN'T BOTHER PAYING ATTENTION TO THE MONKEYS IN MY WINDOW...
WAR IS PROFIT
WHY SHOULD I? I WAS FINALLY STANDING ON THE VERY EDGE, ONLY A FEW VARIABLES LEFT TO SOLVE...
SO I CRANKED...
WAR IS PROFIT
GUT REACTIONS?
...IT'S CLEAR, AND SIMPLE, AND TOTALLY TRUE.
...IT MEANS WHAT IT SAYS, AND SAYS WHAT IT MEANS.
...IT'S THE PERFECT BUMPER STICKER FOR THE MODERN MAN... ULTRA-PERFECT!
AND CRANKED...
AND CRANKED...
0.00023 empathy
0.000 reflection
99.0053 ambition
THEN I TURNED THE PAGE...
GWEN LEFT ME A NOTE!
My Place Tonight 8p.m. Love, Gwen X

MEANWHILE, ACROSS TOWN, IN A FANCY BUILDING AT THE HEART OF THE FINANCIAL DISTRICT...
VERGE WAS HOLDING COURT WITH RENOWNED VENTURE CAPITALISTS FROM ALL THE BIG FIRMS...
HAVING JUST FINISHED PRESENTING HIS PREPARED REMARKS, THERE WAS ONLY ONE QUESTION TO ASK...
GUT REACTIONS?
CAN WE USE IT TO PICK STOCKS?
HOW ABOUT COMMODITIES?
AND CURRENCIES? REAL ESTATE?
NOT IT... HIM, AND YES...AS SOON AS WE HIT CRITICAL MASS, HE COULD ADVISE YOU ON MARKET TRIVIALITIES.
BUT YOU'RE MISSING THE BIG PICTURE.
YOU'RE NOT THINKING GRAND ENOUGH...
YOU'RE FAILING TO SEE THE FOREST THROUGH THE TREES!

OVER THE LAST 100 YEARS, HUMANITY HAS TOILED AWAY, LAYING MILLIONS OF MILES OF WIRES, LAUNCHING HUNDREDS OF SATELLITES INTO ORBIT, PUTTING COMPUTERS INTO THE HANDS OF EVERY MAN, WOMAN AND CHILD ON THE PLANET. DO YOU REALLY THINK WE DID ALL THIS, JUST SO WE COULD BUILD A BETTER SOCIAL NETWORK?
NO WAY!
WE DID ALL THIS SO WE COULD BUILD A NEURAL NETWORK...A VAST GLOBAL MIND THAT WILL TAKE US ALL TO THE NEXT LEVEL!


SO... WE CAN USE IT TO PICK STOCKS?
THIS ISN'T ABOUT SQUEEZING OUT A MILLION USERS SO WE CAN PREDICT WHICH BRAND OF FABRIC SOFTENER WILL SHIP THE MOST UNITS IN THE THIRD QUARTER...
THIS IS ABOUT PULLING IN 100 MILLION USERS...500 MILLION USERS... A FUCKING BILLION!
BANG
THERE'S A UNIVERSE OF NEW DISCOVERIES THAT LIVES JUST BEYOND OUR REACH. PROBLEMS THAT EVEN EINSTEIN COULD NEVER HAVE SOLVED. INVENTIONS THAT EVEN EDISON COULD NEVER HAVE IMAGINED.
I'M TALKING ABOUT MAJOR BREAKTHROUGHS IN EVERY FIELD AND DISCIPLINE. I'M TALKING ABOUT FUNDAMENTAL ADVANCEMENTS THAT CARRY HUMANITY FORWARD IN A COLOSSAL TIDAL WAVE OF CHANGE...
IT'S SO CLOSE I CAN ALREADY FEEL IT!


AND NOW, ALL WE NEED TO MAKE THIS A REALITY, IS $97 MILLION IN FUNDING. THEN WE CAN BRING HIM TO LIFE... THE ONE... THE ONLY, ...THE UNUM!
ANY QUESTIONS?

MEANWHILE... I WAS STILL CRANKING AWAY, ONLY ONE VARIABLE LEFT!
UNUM VARIABLES
SO, WHAT DO YOU THINK--A GOOD SLOGAN?
I HATE IT.
ME, TOO.
SMOG KILLS
WE DON'T BLAME TREES FOR DROPPING THEIR LEAVES ON THE GROUND, SO WHY BLAME PEOPLE FOR SMOG?
0.00000
ZERO?
EXACTLY, SMOG IS NATURAL. IT'S THE FRAGRANCE OF HUMANITY.
IT'S THE AROMA OF PROGRESS...THE SMELL OF LIFE.
THAT'S THE SLOGAN...SMOG IS LIFE!
92.1231
AMBITION
0.00000
CONSCIENCE
AND THERE IT WAS...THE FINAL VALUE IN MY GRID. THE NUMBER WAS THE SMALLEST OF ALL, BUT I DIDN'T CARE--I WAS FINISHED!
MY MONA LISA!

PART FOUR

MIND over MATTER...

6:42 PM

HEADING HOME, I was so energized by grand visions of my unfolding future, I didn't even realize I walked right past him -- the brooding HOMELESS MAN -- bellowing his creepy nonsense at every passerby...

AND THE MONSTER NEVER EATS...
AND THE MONSTER NEVER SLEEPS...
YET THE MONSTER EVER GROWS...
I'M NOT INVISABLE I'M HOMELESS
By reflex, I even gave him another DOLLAR...

AND THEN... I WAS HOME, BURSTING INTO OPAL'S WITH A BIG SMILE.
HELLO, HELLO... LIFE IS GRAND!
NOT FOR US. LOTTERY WINNER NO COME FORWARD YET. IF NO WINNER, NO BONUS.
DON'T WORRY--IT ALWAYS TAKES TIME FOR HUGE JACKPOTS. WINNERS HIRE LAWYERS, FINANCIAL PLANNERS... IT'S A WHOLE PRODUCTION.
WHAT IF WINNER LOST TICKET? OR NOT KNOW HE'S THE ONE. THAT HAPPENED IN OAKLAND LAST YEAR.
WINE
THAT'S NOT GONNA HAPPEN...
THINGS ARE LOOKING UP, FOR ALL OF US...
...I CAN FEEL IT!
My Place Tonight 8pm Love, Gwen X
YOU SEEM DIFFERENT TODAY, MR JOSHUA. NOT SO SAD. IT BE GOOD FOR YOU...

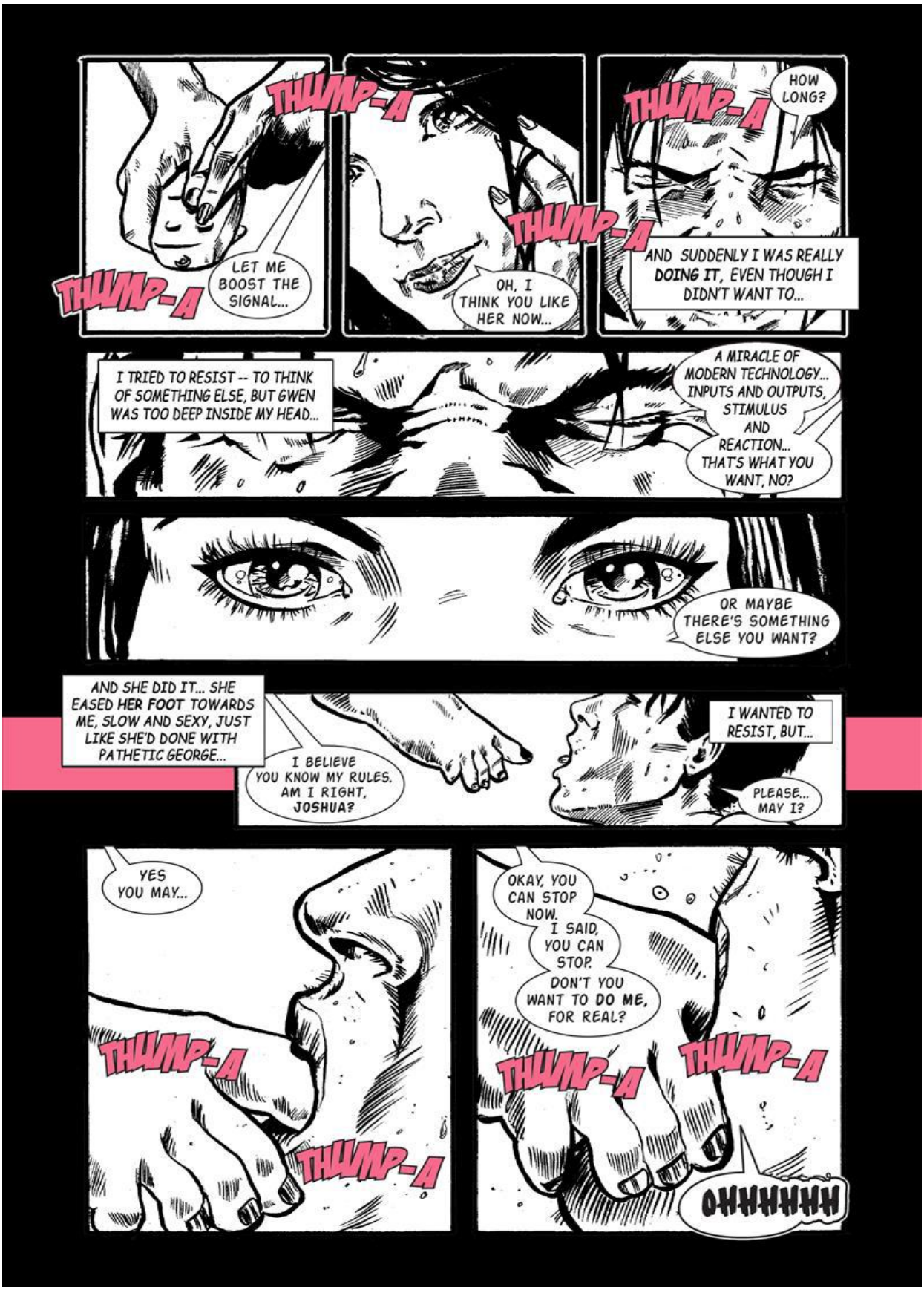
SUPER-NOVA!
AND WITH THAT, I HEADED UPSTAIRS, A SPRING IN MY STEP, A BOTTLE OF WINE IN MY HAND...
SILLY BOY...
EXIT
AGAIN?
WHAT'RE YOU LOOKING AT!

YES, I WAS ENERGIZED, READY FOR ANYTHING...
ESPECIALLY, MY DATE WITH GWEN!
KNOCK
KNOCK
JOSH, YOU'RE EXACTLY ON TIME...I SO LIKE THAT IN A MAN.
AND PINOT GRIGIO...MY FAVORITE!
THAT'S...UM... QUITE A CHAIR YOU HAVE THERE.
I LIKE TO BE COMFORTABLE. BUT I GOTTA SAY, YOU SEEM A LITTLE TENSE. I HAVE JUST THE THING...
NO, THANKS...

THANKS, YOU'RE A DOLL...
I HAD TO LAUGH -- HER BEDROOM WAS ALL PINK AND FRILLY, WITH A TEDDY BEAR ON THE BED...
I FOUND IT!
THERE IT WAS -- A LARGE PILLOW. IT WAS HEAVIER THAN I EXPECTED, BUT I DIDN'T GIVE IT ANY THOUGHT. I JUST HURRIED BACK INTO THE LIVING ROOM...
HUH?
SO, JOSHUA... TELL ME, WHY ARE YOU HERE?
WHY? THE NOTE SAID 8:00 SHARP, RIGHT?
I KNOW, BUT WHY'D YOU COME?
WHAT DO YOU THINK'S GONNA HAPPEN?

I... WELL...
YOU HOPING TO FUCK ME, IS THAT IT?
NO... I MEAN... I'M NOT--
OF COURSE YOU ARE, BUT FIRST...I'D LIKE A LITTLE PREVIEW OF THE ACTION. AN AUDITION, IF YOU WILL. PLEASE, THE PILLOW...
PERFECT, YOU FOUND THE RIGHT ONE.
RIGHT ONE... FOR WHAT?
IS THAT A RIPCORD?
YANK
MEET JANET, YOUR AUDITION PARTNER. CONSIDER IT FOREPLAY.
POP
YOU'RE JOKING... RIGHT?
NOT AT ALL...

IMPRESS ME, LIKE YOU MEAN IT. LIKE THIS...
OHHH...OHH... FUCK...YES!
YOUR TURN.
FINE...
HOW'S THIS... GOOD ENOUGH FOR YOU?
AND I DID IT, EXAGERATED AND MECHANICAL, LIKE I WAS DELIBERATELY PLAY-ACTING...
YOU CALL THIS AN AUDITION? YOU'RE JUST PRETENDING. DO IT LIKE YOU MEAN IT. IMPRESS ME.
BUT I COULDN'T, AND SHE KNEW I COULDN'T...
I THINK YOU NEED A LITTLE HELP.
HOW'S THIS...
CLICK
HUH?
SOMETHING TURNED ON INSIDE THE DOLL....
THAT'S BETTER, ISN'T IT, JOSHUA?

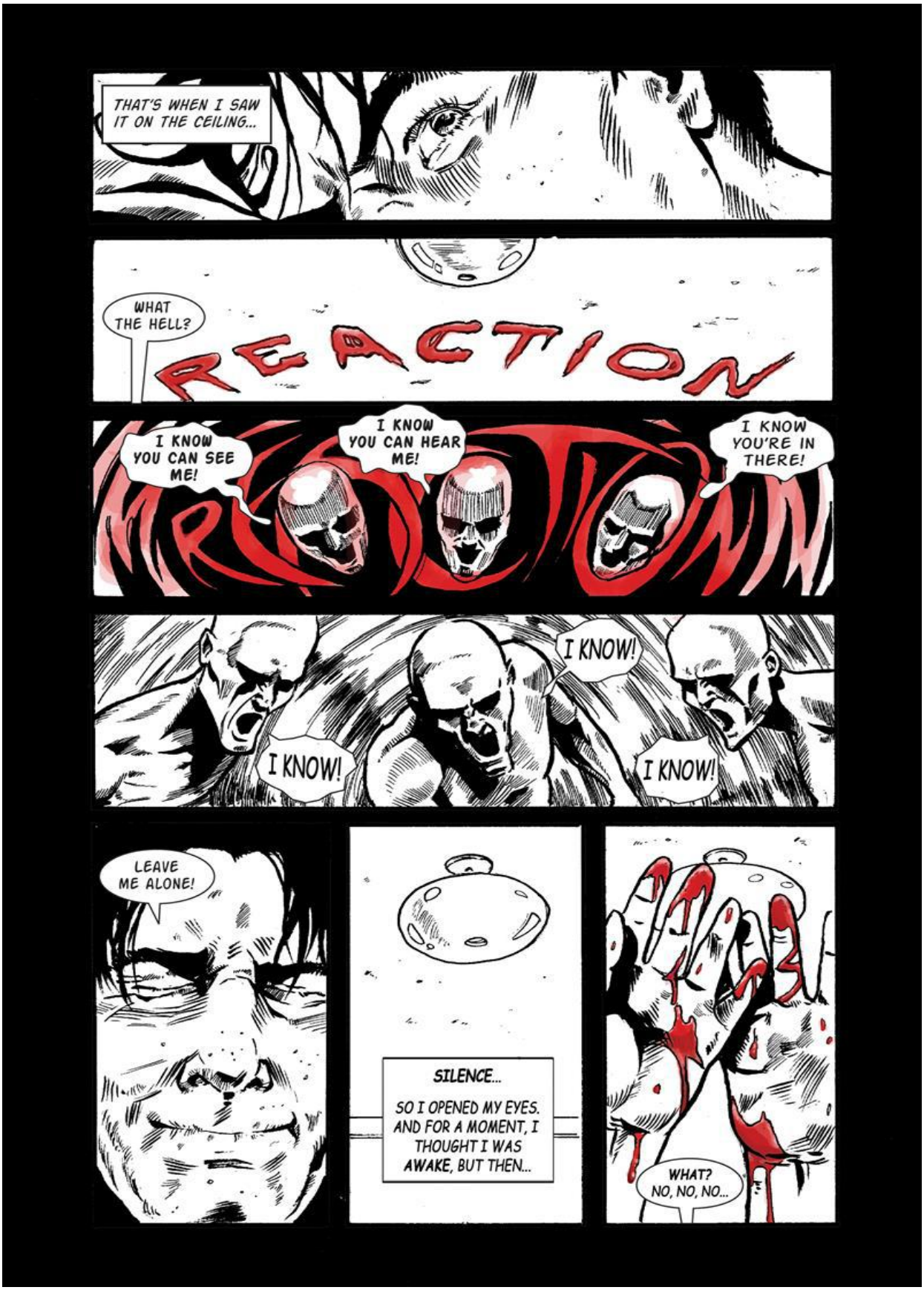

THUMP-A
LET ME BOOST THE SIGNAL...
THUMP-A
OH, I THINK YOU LIKE HER NOW...
THUMP-A
HOW LONG?
AND SUDDENLY I WAS REALLY DOING IT, EVEN THOUGH I DIDN'T WANT TO...
I TRIED TO RESIST -- TO THINK OF SOMETHING ELSE, BUT GWEN WAS TOO DEEP INSIDE MY HEAD...
A MIRACLE OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY... INPUTS AND OUTPUTS, STIMULUS AND REACTION... THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT, NO?
OR MAYBE THERE'S SOMETHING ELSE YOU WANT?
AND SHE DID IT... SHE EASED HER FOOT TOWARDS ME, SLOW AND SEXY, JUST LIKE SHE'D DONE WITH PATHETIC GEORGE...
I BELIEVE YOU KNOW MY RULES. AM I RIGHT, JOSHUA?
I WANTED TO RESIST, BUT...
PLEASE... MAY I?
YES YOU MAY...
THUMP-A
THUMP-A
OKAY, YOU CAN STOP NOW.
I SAID, YOU CAN STOP.
DON'T YOU WANT TO DO ME, FOR REAL?
THUMP-A
THUMP-A
OHHHHHH

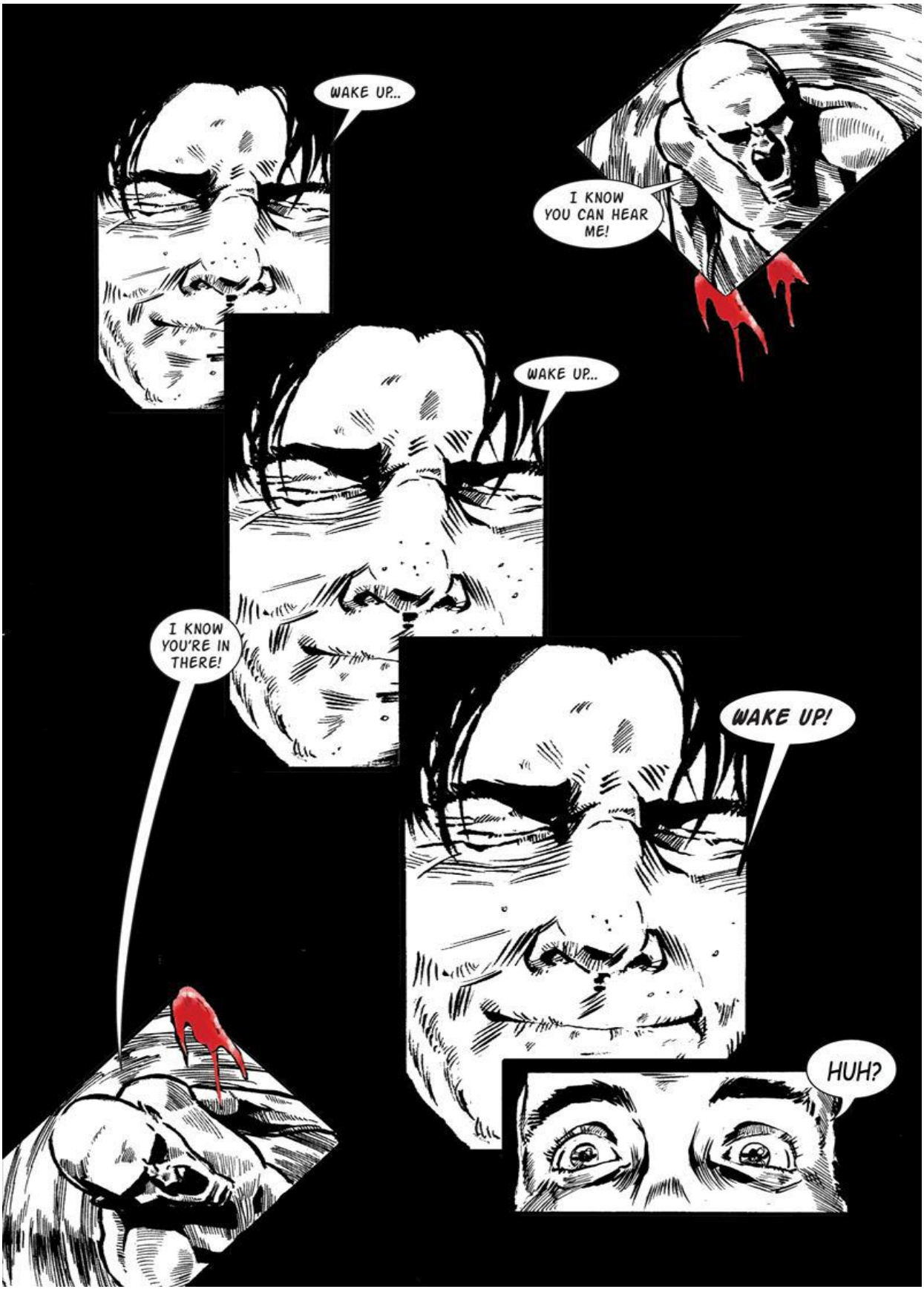
FUCKING PATHETIC!
HUH?
THAT'S WHAT YOU GET FOR INVADING MY PRIVACY! FOR SPYING ON ME WITH VERGE!
YOU SHOULD HAVE TOLD ME THE TRUTH. I WOULDN'T HAVE MINDED!
YOU WOULDN'T HAVE MINDED!
WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU TO JUDGE ME?
I LIKE WHO I AM.
I CAN LIVE WITH WHO I AM. WHAT ABOUT YOU?
NOW, GET THE FUCK OUT!
SLAM
CRAP...

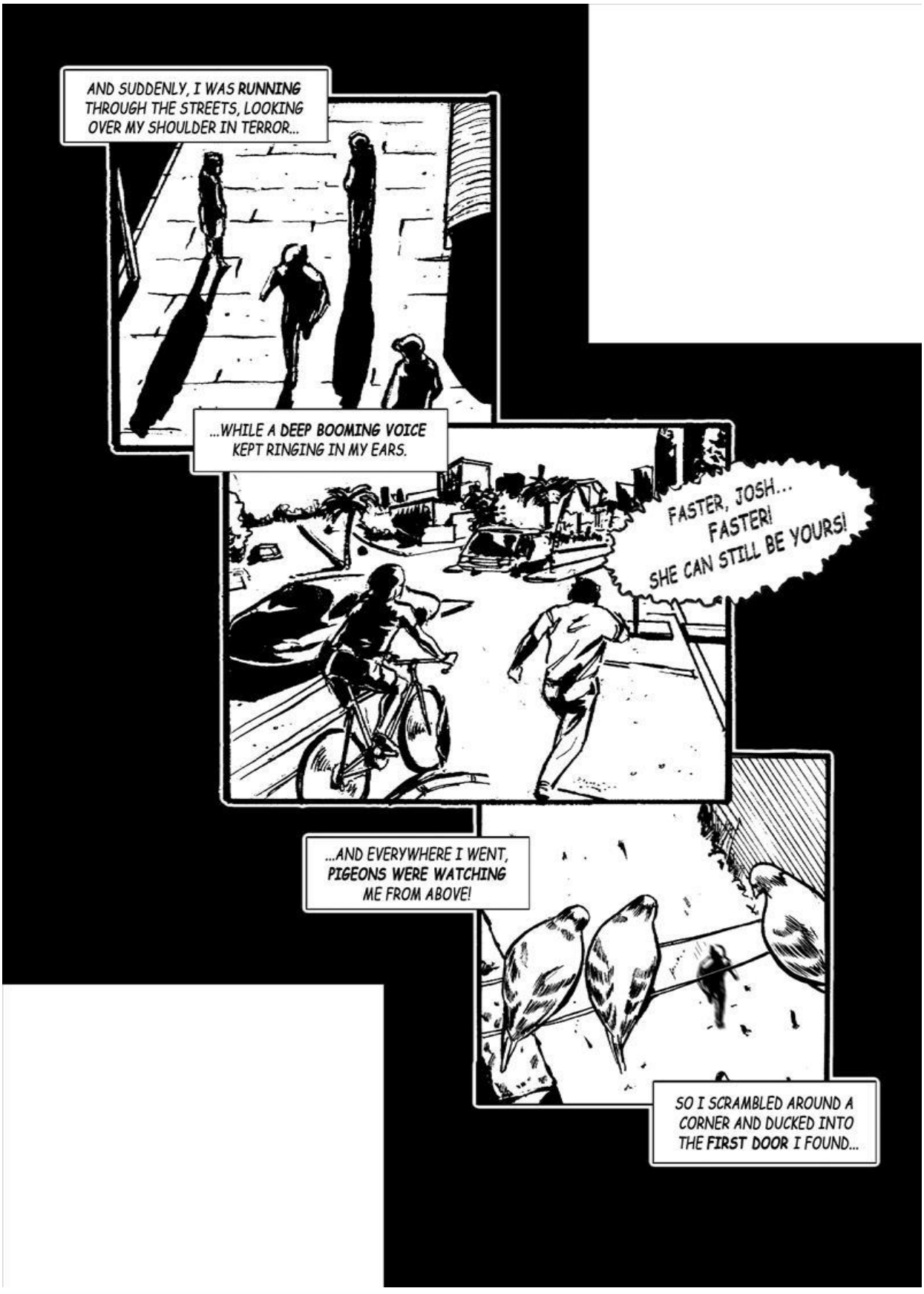
FEELING DAZED, I DRAGGED MYSELF OUT OF THERE...
I WAS A MESS, NAUSEOUS AND DIZZY AND...
...EVERYTHING WAS GOING BLURRY.
VERGE?
WHAT'RE YOU DOING OUT HERE?
HE LOCKED ME OUT.
WHO DID?
WHO DO YOU THINK? UNUM. HE HACKED INTO MY SECURITY SYSTEM. TOOK FULL CONTROL. IT'S ACTUALLY PRETTY SLICK...
UNUM? WHY?
BECAUSE I FUCKED UP. ALL SEVEN INVESTORS PASSED ON THE DEAL.
THEY SAID I'D BURN TOO MUCH CASH BEFORE THEY EVER SEE A RETURN ON INVESTMENT, BUT THAT'S BULLSHIT! IT'S ME THEY DIDN'T LIKE. I SCARED THEM...
THEY ALL PASSED?

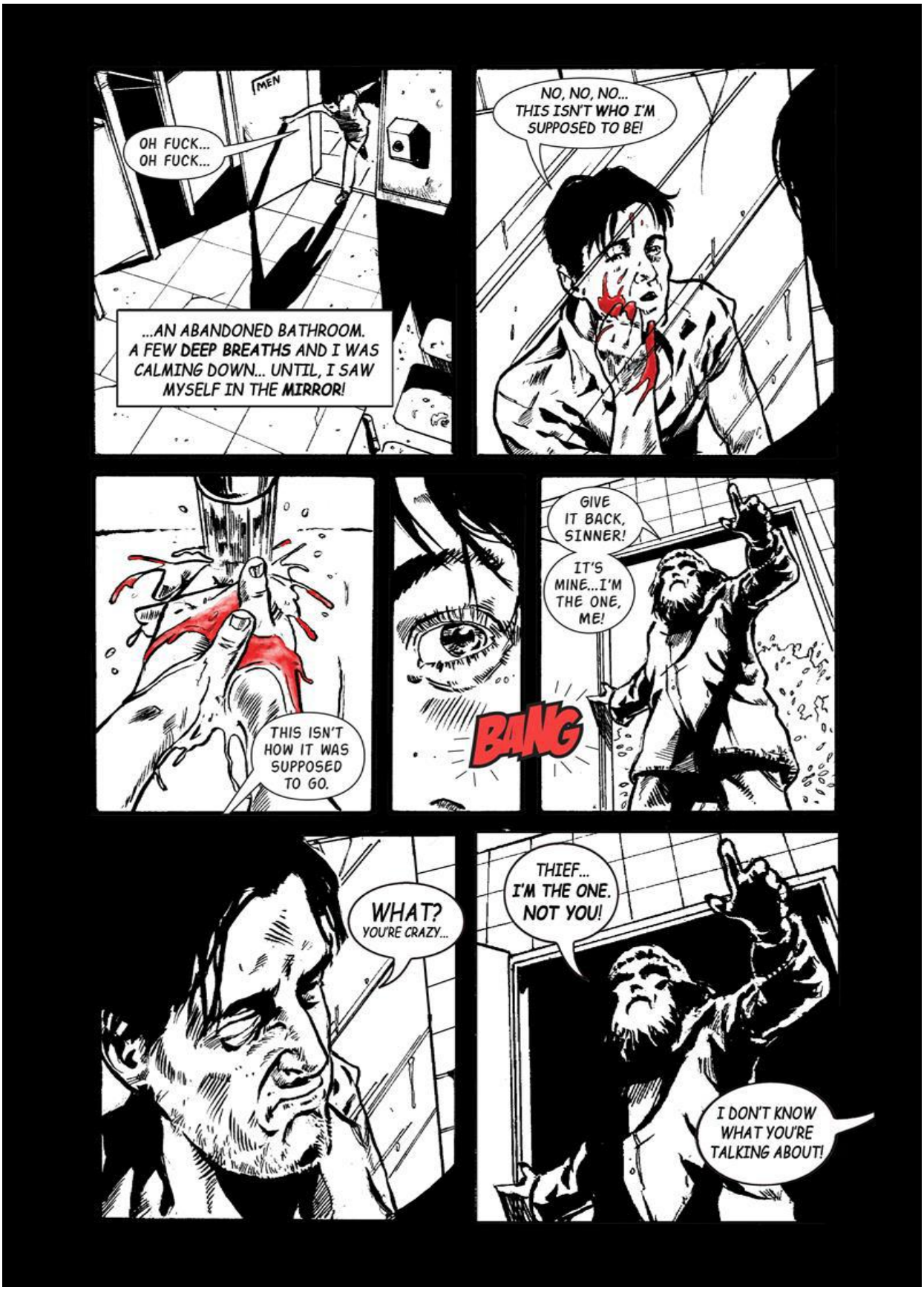
THEY ALL PASSED...THE BIG **FUCK YOU.**
I COULD SEE IT IN THEIR EYES, STARING AT ME LIKE SOME KIND OF ***FREAK*** BECAUSE I WASN'T JUST ANOTHER *STIFF SUIT* RAMBLING ON ABOUT RISK-FACTORS AND BALANCE-SHEETS.
THEN SCREW THEM. WE'LL FIND DIFFERENT INVESTORS. VERGE, THIS IS BIG. THIS IS EVERYTHING!
IT'S OVER, JOSH. THIS WASN'T MY FIRST REJECTION. OR MY SECOND. I'M OUT OF INVESTORS. AND I'M OUT OF CASH. I CAN'T EVEN PAY FOR LAST MONTH'S DATA-LINES. IT'S FUCKING OVER.

REALLY?
REALLY.
WELL, COME ON, YOU CAN CRASH AT MY PLACE.
NAH, YOU DON'T NEED HIM PISSED AT YOU, TOO...
UNUM? HE WON'T KNOW.
SURE HE WILL. HE HACKED INTO MY PIGEON SYSTEM TOO. TOOK FULL CONTROL.
THE PIGEONS?
BEFORE I LEFT, HE HAD 300,000 USERS ONLINE, ALL WORKING TOGETHER TO FLY THE LITTLE FUCKERS AROUND THE CITY.
IT'S ACTUALLY PRETTY SLICK...
300,000 PEOPLE WERE WATCHING THE BIRDS JUST NOW?! 300,000?!
I KNOW... IT'S AWESOME!
MY HEAD WAS SPINNING. MAYBE IT WAS GWEN. MAYBE IT WAS UNUM. MAYBE IT WAS...
WHOA, I WAS TOO DIZZY - I HAD TO LAY DOWN....


THAT'S WHEN I SAW IT ON THE CEILING...
WHAT THE HELL?
REACTION
I KNOW YOU CAN SEE ME!
I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME!
I KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE!
I KNOW!
I KNOW!
I KNOW!
LEAVE ME ALONE!
SILENCE...
SO I OPENED MY EYES. AND FOR A MOMENT, I THOUGHT I WAS AWAKE, BUT THEN...
WHAT? NO, NO, NO...


WAKE UP..
I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME!
WAKE UP..
I KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE!
WAKE UP!
HUH?


AND SUDDENLY, I WAS RUNNING THROUGH THE STREETS, LOOKING OVER MY SHOULDER IN TERROR...
...WHILE A DEEP BOOMING VOICE KEPT RINGING IN MY EARS.
FASTER, JOSH... FASTER! SHE CAN STILL BE YOURS!
...AND EVERYWHERE I WENT, PIGEONS WERE WATCHING ME FROM ABOVE!
SO I SCRAMBLED AROUND A CORNER AND DUCKED INTO THE FIRST DOOR I FOUND...


MEN
OH FUCK... OH FUCK...
...AN ABANDONED BATHROOM. A FEW DEEP BREATHS AND I WAS CALMING DOWN... UNTIL, I SAW MYSELF IN THE MIRROR!
NO, NO, NO... THIS ISN'T WHO I'M SUPPOSED TO BE!
THIS ISN'T HOW IT WAS SUPPOSED TO GO.
BANG
GIVE IT BACK, SINNER!
IT'S MINE...I'M THE ONE, ME!
WHAT? YOU'RE CRAZY...
THIEF... I'M THE ONE. NOT YOU!
I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT!

LIAR!
SINNER!
THIEF!
GIVE - IT - BACK!
IT'S YOUR GREATNESS, JOSHUA... YOU DESERVE IT! YOU EARNED IT!
SHE CAN STILL BE YOURS...
I DON'T KNOW IF IT WAS THE WILD RAGE ON THE HOMELESS MAN'S FACE... OR IF IT WAS THAT DEEP VOICE RINGING IN MY EAR, BUT AT THAT MOMENT, IT HIT ME...

...THE ONLY WAY TO ACHIEVE MY GREATNESS, WAS TO GRIT MY TEETH AND FIGHT FOR IT.
STAY AWAY FROM ME... OR ELSE!
OR ELSE WHAT? S-I-N-N-E-R!

WHATEVER IT TAKES!
AAARRRGGGGGG!
HUH? OH... OH...
4:45 AM
IT WAS ONLY A DREAM. BUT THEN, I LOOKED DOWN AND SAW -- INSTEAD OF CLENCHING A RUSTY PIPE, I HELD SOMETHING FAR MORE POWERFUL.
UNUM...
SHE CAN STILL BE YOURS

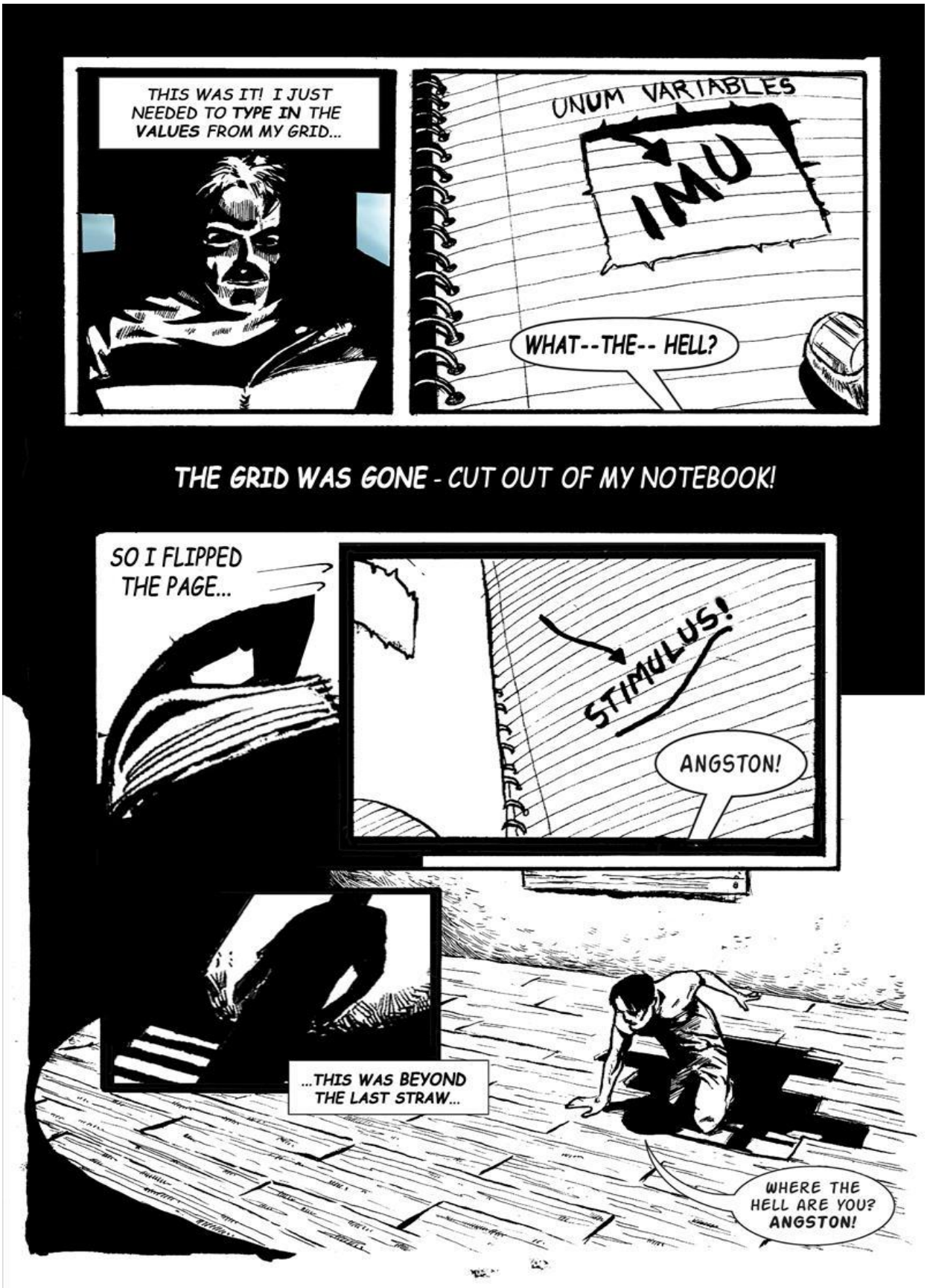
4:55 AM

NOTEBOOK in hand, I strode down the hall....

...determined to put things back on track.

VERGE WAS GONE, HIS DOOR STILL LOCKED, THE LIGHT ABOVE FLASHING RED. BUT I DIDN'T CARE - I HAD A PLAN...
UNUM! IT'S ME... JOSH!
IT'S NOT OVER. IT'S NOT!
WE CAN STILL DO THIS.
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
PLEASE... UNUM! LET ME IN.
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
AND THE LIGHT WENT GREEN...
UNUM...
HELLO, UNUM... I FINISHED IT...THE WHOLE GRID!
ALL 25 VARIABLES!
CHECKED AND RE-CHECKED!
DID YOU HEAR ME? I FINISHED IT!
UNUM, PLEASE... TALK TO ME!
I JUST NEED TO PLUG IN THE NUMBERS. THAT SHOULD BOOST CONVERGENCE BY TENFOLD. THAT'S AN IQ OF 300, AT LEAST!

PLEASE...
...I KNOW THAT'S BELOW YOUR FULL POTENTIAL...
...BUT, WITH THAT LEVEL OF IQ, YOU CAN HELP ME FIND A WAY TO GET THE FUNDING WE NEED...
...WHATEVER IT TAKES!
WHATEVER IT TAKES?
YES, WHATEVER IT TAKES. JUST SHOW ME HOW TO PLUG IN THE NUMBERS.
SHE CAN STILL BE YOURS...
PSYCHOMETRIC VARIABLES
0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000
0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000
0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000
0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000
0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000
SO...I JUST TYPE IN THE VALUES?
0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000
0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000
0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000
0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000
0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000 0.000
YES JOSHUA, YOU SHOULD.

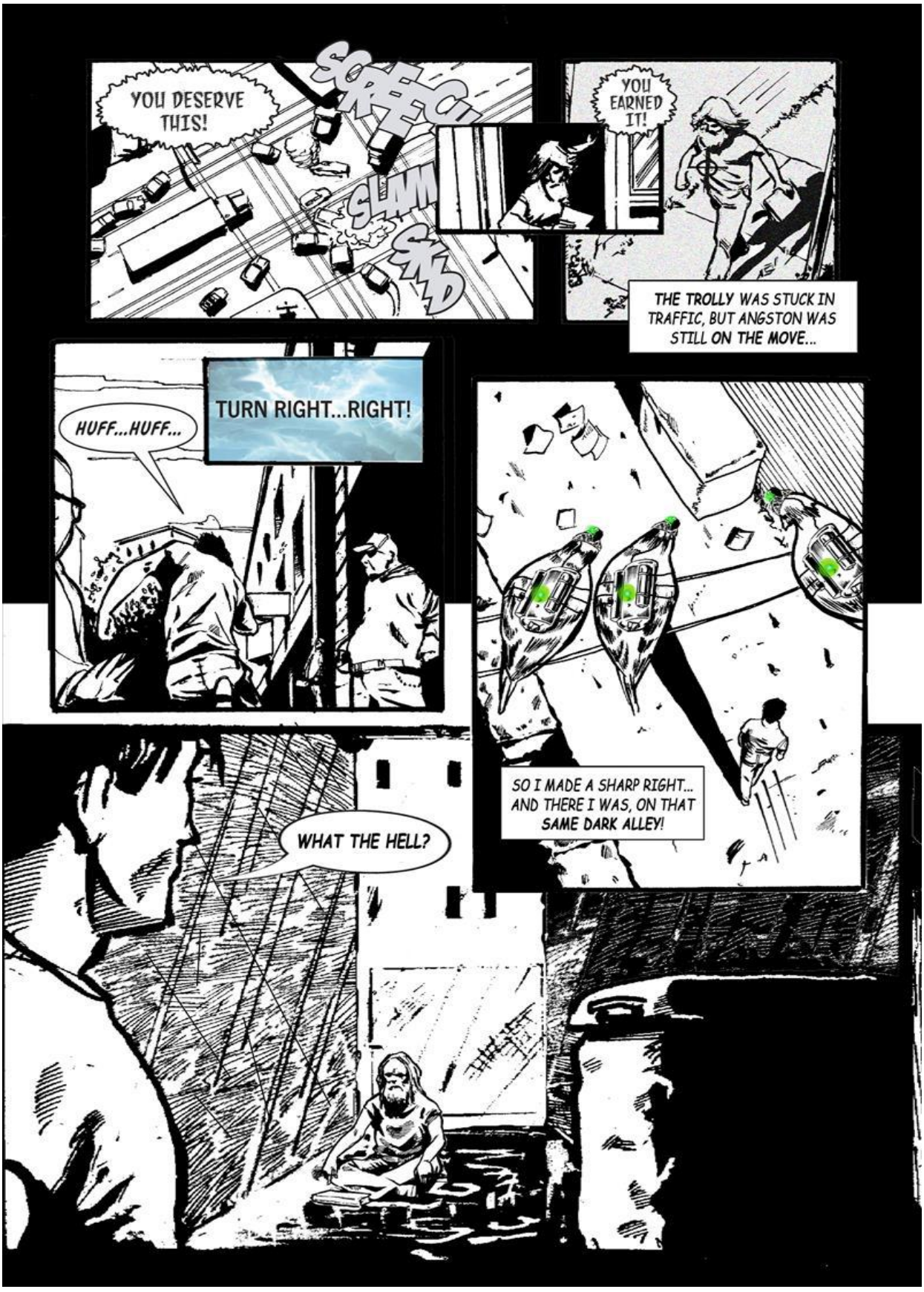

THIS WAS IT! I JUST NEEDED TO TYPE IN THE VALUES FROM MY GRID...
UNUM VARIABLES
IMU
WHAT--THE-- HELL?
THE GRID WAS GONE - CUT OUT OF MY NOTEBOOK!
SO I FLIPPED THE PAGE...
STIMULUS!
ANGSTON!
...THIS WAS BEYOND THE LAST STRAW...
WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU? ANGSTON!

ANGSTON, WHERE ARE MY NUMBERS!
BUT THE PLACE WAS EMPTY, ONLY ONE THING LEFT ON THE FLOOR...
EINSTEIN
for Josh
FUCKING NUT-JOB!
UNUM...CAN YOU HEAR ME? UNUM?
YES, JOSHUA, LOOK...
PIGEON-CAM
HE HAS YOUR NUMBERS, JOSHUA.
HE HAS YOUR GREATNESS...
AND THERE, TAPED INSIDE HIS GODDAMN FRANKENSTEIN BOOK, WAS... MY GRID!

FUCKING ANGSTON!
FASTER, JOSH FASTER...
EXIT
STAIRS
SHE CAN STILL BE YOURS...

GO LEFT...
FIRE DO
FASTER, JOSH...FASTER!
DON'T STOP!
DON'T WALK
SCREECH!
SKID
DON'T LOOK BACK...
CRUNCH
OH, NO...
RUN, JOSHUA, RUN!

I'LL NEVER CATCH HIM...
DON'T WORRY, JOSH... YOU WILL.
HE'S GETTING AWAY!
NO... HE'S NOT.
ACCESSING TRAFFIC NETWORK _I

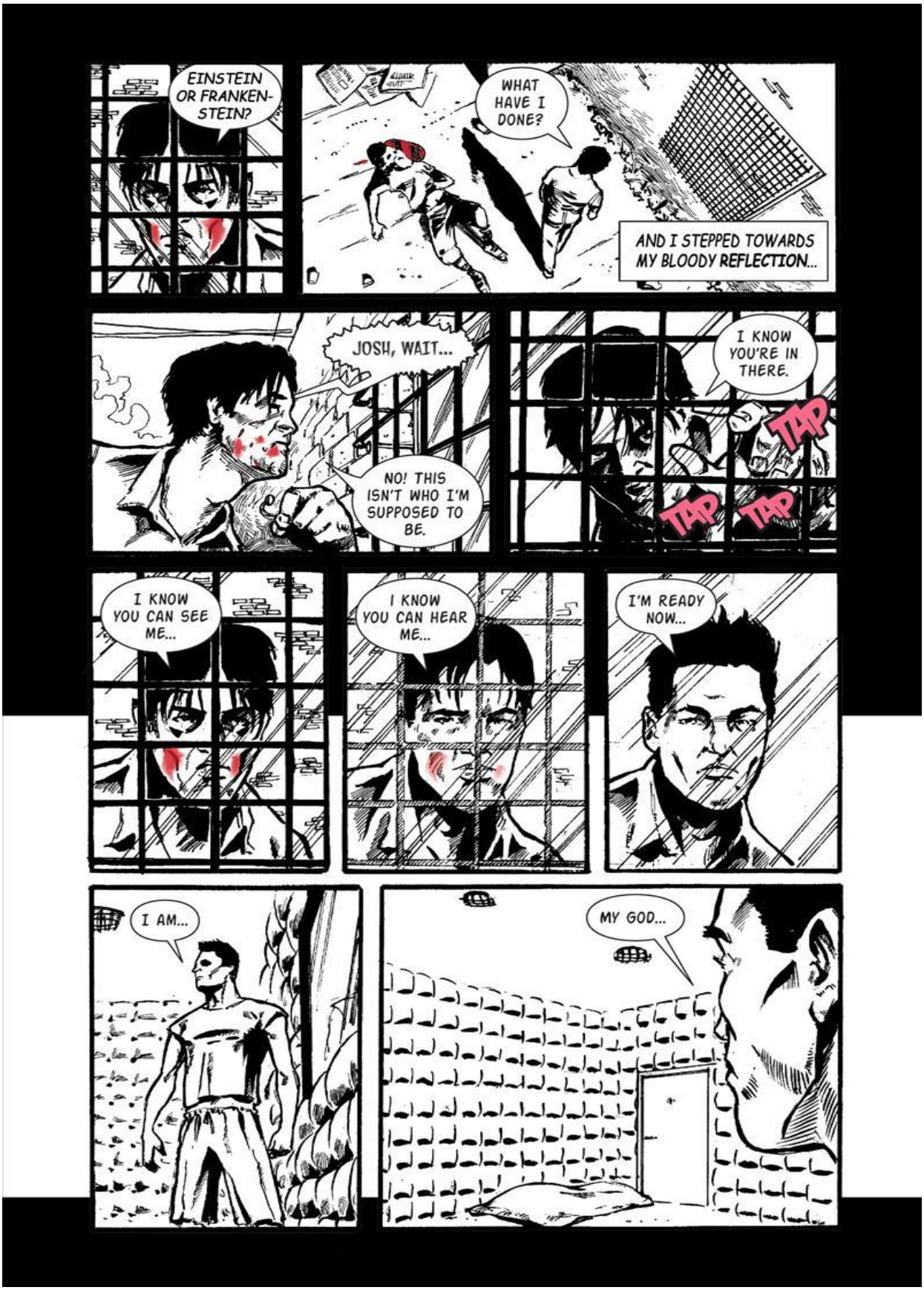

YOU DESERVE THIS!
SCREECH
GLUMM
SMD
YOU EARNED IT!
THE TROLLY WAS STUCK IN TRAFFIC, BUT ANGSTON WAS STILL ON THE MOVE...
HUFF...HUFF...
TURN RIGHT...RIGHT!
SO I MADE A SHARP RIGHT... AND THERE I WAS, ON THAT SAME DARK ALLEY!
WHAT THE HELL?

REACTION!
FRANKENSTEIN
GIVE IT BACK... NOW!
BUT ANGSTON DIDN'T BUDGE. INSTEAD HE JUST SPOKE, SOFT AND CALM...
ARE YOU BRAVE JOSHUA KETTERMAN, OR JUST ANOTHER COWARD?
I WAS IN NO MOOD FOR BULLSHIT, SO I GRABBED THE BOOK. THE HIPPIE WEIRDO MADE NO ATTEMPT TO STOP ME...
POWER WITHOUT PURPOSE!
INTELLIGENCE WITHOUT INTELLECT!
FRANKENSTEIN
WHERE THE HELL IS IT?!
PAGE AFTER PAGE, BUT MY GRID WASN'T THERE, ANGSTON STILL RAMBLING...
CONSCIOUSNESS WITHOUT CONSCIENCE! WILL WITHOUT WISDOM!
THE BIGGER HE GETS, THE SMALLER WE BECOME.

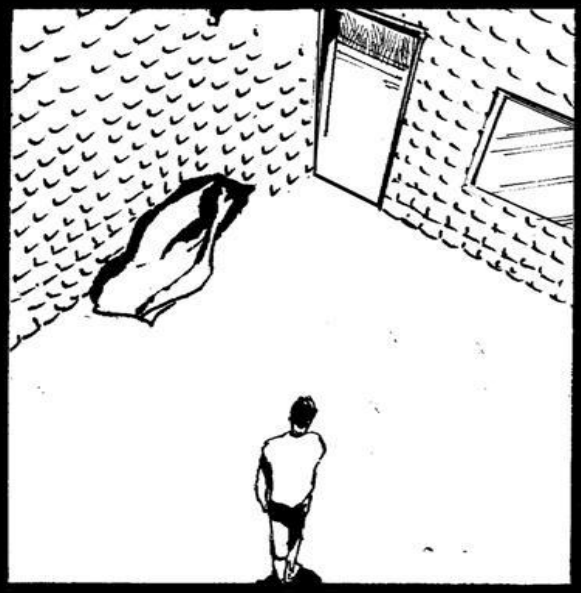
SHUT THE HELL UP! NOW... GIVE ME BACK MY GODDAMN NUMBERS!
I CAN'T. AND I WON'T.
HE'S CRAZY, JOSHUA... MAKE HIM!
THEY'RE MINE! I EARNED THIS! I DESERVE THIS! ME.... NOT YOU!
IS THIS REALLY WHO WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE? IS THIS TRULY WHAT WE'RE SUPPOSED TO DO?

THIS IS YOUR GREATNESS, JOSH... YOUR MONA LISA!
GIVE IT BACK!
NOW!
EINSTEIN OR FRANKENSTEIN? THE DECISION IS YOURS.
I'M NOT MESSING AROUND. I WANT THOSE NUMBERS!
NO!
BAM
JUST HAND THEM OVER, THEN I'LL LEAVE YOU ALONE...
LOOK WHAT HE'S BECOMING.
LOOK WHAT YOU'RE BECOMING.
I'LL KILL YOU...I MEAN IT!
HE WANTS YOU TO FAIL, JOSHUA!
AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, A FAILURE. A FREAK!

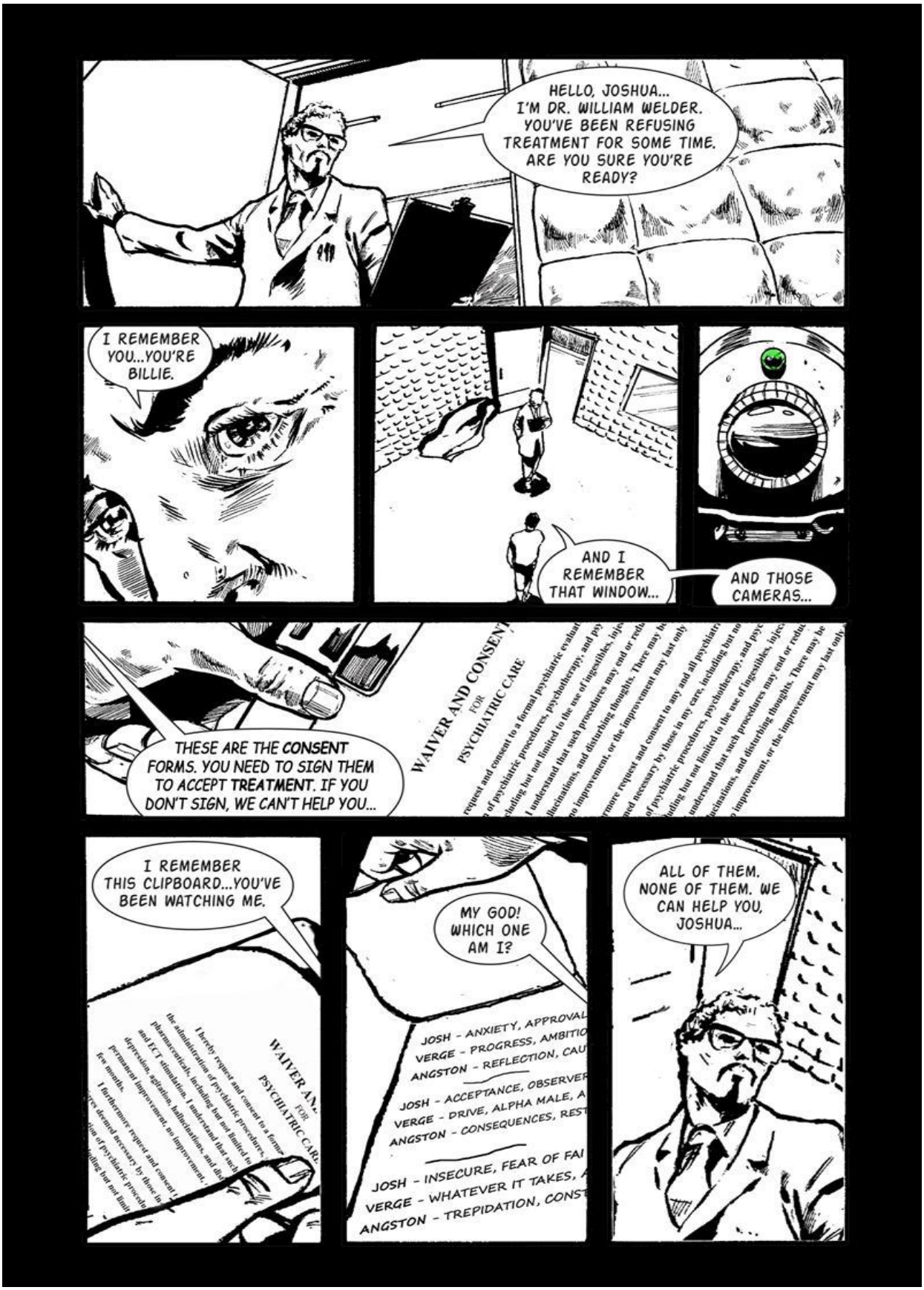
BAMM
WHY
SLAM
ARE
KRAK
YOU
BAMM
FUCKING
KRAK
WITH
SLAM
ME?!
DON'T STOP!
LOOK AT THE WINDOW...
EINSTEIN OR FRANKENSTEIN?
THE DECISION IS STILL YOURS...
MY GOD.... IS THAT REALLY ME?


EINSTEIN OR FRANKEN-STEIN?
WHAT HAVE I DONE?
AND I STEPPED TOWARDS MY BLOODY REFLECTION...
JOSH, WAIT...
NO! THIS ISN'T WHO I'M SUPPOSED TO BE.
I KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE.
TAP
TAP
TAP
I KNOW YOU CAN SEE ME...
I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME...
I'M READY NOW...
I AM...
MY GOD...

And there I was, back in my LITTLE ROOM, the MIRRORED WINDOW exactly where it had always been. But now...



...I was on the WRONG SIDE of the glass.


HELLO, JOSHUA... I'M DR. WILLIAM WELDER. YOU'VE BEEN REFUSING TREATMENT FOR SOME TIME. ARE YOU SURE YOU'RE READY?
I REMEMBER YOU...YOU'RE BILLIE.
AND I REMEMBER THAT WINDOW...
AND THOSE CAMERAS...
THESE ARE THE CONSENT FORMS. YOU NEED TO SIGN THEM TO ACCEPT TREATMENT. IF YOU DON'T SIGN, WE CAN'T HELP YOU...
WAIVER AND CONSENT
FOR
PSYCHIATRIC CARE
I REMEMBER THIS CLIPBOARD...YOU'VE BEEN WATCHING ME.
MY GOD! WHICH ONE AM I?
JOSH - ANXIETY, APPROVAL
VERGE - PROGRESS, AMBITIO
ANGSTON - REFLECTION, CAU
JOSH - ACCEPTANCE, OBSERVER
VERGE - DRIVE, ALPHA MALE, A
ANGSTON - CONSEQUENCES, REST
JOSH - INSECURE, FEAR OF FAI
VERGE - WHATEVER IT TAKES, A
ANGSTON - TREPIDATION, CONST
ALL OF THEM. NONE OF THEM. WE CAN HELP YOU, JOSHUA...

YOU JUST NEED TO ACCEPT TREATMENT, SO WE CAN GET YOU RESTED AND BACK ON YOUR MEDS.
I'M READY NOW. I AM.
FIRST A SEDATIVE, TO HELP YOU SLEEP. YOU'VE BEEN AWAKE FOR TWO WEEKS.
TWO WEEKS?!
DON'T WORRY JOSH, BEFORE YOU KNOW IT...
D-DIZZY...
YOU'LL BE BACK TO THE MAN YOU WERE ALWAYS MEANT TO BE...
...I PROMISE.
EVERGREEN HOSPITAL

THREE DAYS LATER...
RISE AND SHINE.
KNOCK
KNOCK
HOW ARE YOU DOING TODAY? ANY BETTER?
I'M NOT SURE. I FEEL...PECULIAR.
WELL, YOU'VE BEEN THROUGH A LOT.
YOU HUNGRY?
NO... THANKS.
IT'S YOUR FAVORITE. A BAGEL, TOASTED, AND A COFFEE.
ARE YOU... GWEN?
YOU REMEMBER. THAT'S VERY GOOD.

IT FEELS LIKE I WOKE UP FROM A DREAM, BUT I CAN'T SORT OUT WHICH MEMORIES ARE REAL AND WHICH AREN'T.
DON'T WORRY, IT'LL ALL COME BACK.
YOU'RE IN GOOD HANDS HERE.
IS THIS...A NUT-HOUSE?
NO, WE CALL IT A RECOVERY WARD. IT'S NOT FOR LONG-TERM TREATMENT, BUT FOR PATIENTS WHO JUST NEED A LITTLE TIME TO PULL THINGS TOGETHER.
I KNOW THIS SOUNDS SILLY, BUT...WHO AM I?
YOU'RE JOSH KETTERMAN...
OR I SHOULD SAY, DR. JOSHUA KETTERMAN, PHD IN COMPUTATIONAL PSYCHODYNAMICS--ONE OF THE TOP SCIENTISTS IN YOUR FIELD.
I REMEMBER THAT... A CHILD PRODIGY...WENT TO COLLEGE AT 12, PHD BY 17, A PROFESSOR AT BERKELEY EVER SINCE.
VERY GOOD...
BUT, I ALSO REMEMBER LEAVING BERKELEY. IS THAT RIGHT?
IT IS. YOU WERE CONVINCED THAT NOBODY IN YOUR FIELD APPRECIATED YOUR WORK.
THAT IT SCARED THEM...

AND WORSE, THEY KEPT *REJECTING* YOUR FUNDING. YOU GOT SO FED UP, YOU SMASHED UP YOUR OWN LAB AND DISAPPEARED.
IT TURNS OUT, YOU MOVED TO A SMALL APARTMENT IN SAN FRANCISCO SO YOU COULD PLOW FORWARD ON YOUR OWN.
YOU WORKED DAY AND NIGHT, HARDLY EATING, HARDLY SLEEPING... LIVING ON NOTHING BUT CHIPS AND DIET COKE.
YOU SANK IN SO DEEP, YOU WOUND UP *UNCONSCIOUS* FROM EXHAUSTION AND MALNUTRITION. YOU ALMOST DIED.
I ALMOST DIED?
YOU WOULD HAVE, IF NOT FOR THE OLD WOMAN WHO OWNS THE MARKET BELOW YOUR APARTMENT-- OPAL.
SHE FOUND YOU ON THE ABANDONED THIRD FLOOR OF THE BUILDING, FLAT ON YOUR BACK, UNABLE TO MOVE. SHE CALLED 911.
MR KETTERMAN, I KNOW YOU CAN SEE ME... I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME... I KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE...
I THOUGHT THAT WAS JUST A BAD DREAM...

I KNOW, YOU TOLD ME ALL ABOUT IT, BEING HELPLESS ON THE FLOOR, BLURRY FACES ALL AROUND.
SO... ARE YOU MY DOCTOR?
YOUR THERAPIST.
WE'VE CHATTED EVERY DAY SINCE YOU ARRIVED, DIGGING DOWN, LAYER BY LAYER, SEARCHING FOR THE REAL JOSH KETTERMAN WITHIN.
IT'S NICE TO FINALLY MEET YOU.
YOU MIGHT WANT TO TAKE A LOOK AT THIS. IT'S WHAT GOT YOU IN HERE.
NOTES
I WASN'T SURE THAT WAS EVEN REAL.
IT'S ALL HERE--
--MY THEOREMS AND ALGORITHMS, MY STATISTICAL MODELS. IT'S YEARS OF WORK.
I KNOW, YOU TOLD ME ABOUT THAT, TOO-- ABOUT BRINGING HIM TO LIFE, THE ONE, THE UNUM. IT'S FASCINATING...
AMBITION 0.43271
SELF ASSURANCE 15.625112
CONSCIENCE 0.0000
REFLECTION 12.011178
LUST 1.01113
EMPATHY 6.12.74.1

OF COURSE, IT'S ALL JUST ACADEMICS--THEORIES TO BE TESTED AND PAPERS TO BE PUBLISHED, BUT NOT **IMPLEMENTED.**
I KNOW-- YOU TOLD ME THAT, TOO.
IT SEEMS SO RIDICULOUS NOW, THINKING I COULD BUILD A **SUPER-INTELLIGENCE** THAT SPEAKS FOR ALL MANKIND. EVEN IF SUCH A THING WERE POSSIBLE...
IT WOULD BE A COLOSSAL UNDERTAKING...
...REQUIRING A HUGE STAFF, A BUILDING FULL OF COMPUTERS, A VAST COMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE.
IT'S ALL JUST SO...**CRAZY.**
OR BRILLIANT.
NO, CRAZY. I MEAN, IF IT WAS POSSIBLE, IT WOULD BE...WELL... ONE OF THE GREATEST SCIENTIFIC ACHIEVEMENTS OF ALL TIME.
I KNOW-- YOU TOLD ME THAT, TOO.

I SPENT THE NEXT FEW WEEKS UNDER GENERAL CARE, WHICH REALLY JUST MEANT SITTING AND THINKING AND GETTING TO KNOW MYSELF AGAIN...
I ALSO GOT TO KNOW GWEN BETTER.
WE SPENT A LOT OF TIME TOGETHER DURING THOSE WEEKS AND IT WASN'T JUST AT OUR REGULAR SESSIONS.
I ALSO RAN INTO SOME OLD FRIENDS...
GEORGE?
HE DOES THAT TO ALL THE WOMEN HERE. IT'S NOT A BIG DEAL - LITERALLY...
DO WE NEED TO MAKE YOU WEAR DIAPERS AGAIN?
I HOPE YOU GET HAZARD PAY...
NO, BUT I GET MY SHOTS FOR FREE...

HELLO, HELLO...WE ALL READY TO GET FOCUSED?
I ALSO SPENT A FEW HOURS EACH DAY IN GROUP THERAPY, WHICH FELT ODDLY FAMILIAR.
SO, WHO WANTS TO SHARE? JUST REMEMBER, PLEASE BE OPEN AND HONEST -- GUT REACTIONS, RAW INSTICTS...
SAM
HARRY
ALICE
I ALWAYS FEEL SMALL AND DISCONNECTED, LIKE A LONE LITTLE SARDINE IN A GREAT BIG OCEAN...
ME TOO.
EXCELLENT... AND WHY DO YOU THINK THAT IS. WHAT'S THE REAL ISSUE?
ME... I WANT A LOUDER VOICE, EVEN IF I'M JUST A SMALL PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER AND STRONGER...
DAMN RIGHT.

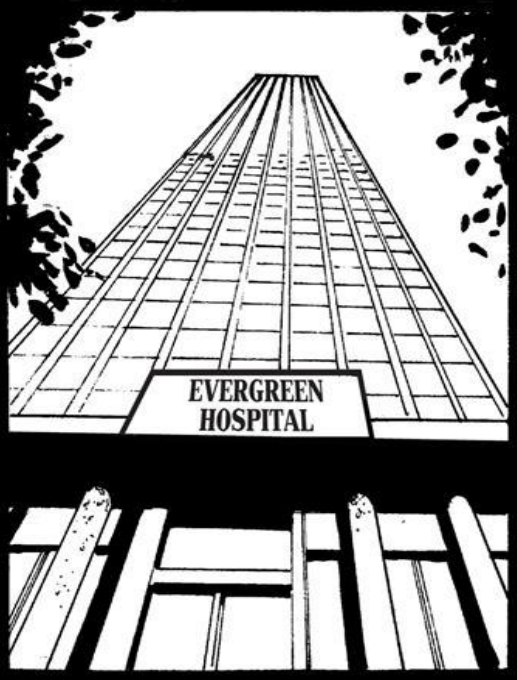
THE WEEKS PASSED QUICKLY...
AND, I FELT STRONGER EVERY DAY.
BUT, THE STRANGE DREAMS STILL CAME EVERY NIGHT.
EVIL BEGETS EVIL! SIN BEGETS SIN!
SAVVY
Jubilee
HEY, YOU...
AND THE MONSTER NEVER SLEEPS...
HELLO?
HE ALWAYS LEADS ME HERE, TO THIS SAME DARK ALLEY, APPROACHING THAT SAME RUSTY DUMPSTER...

AND BEHIND THE DUMPSTER, I ALWAYS FIND HIM, ASLEEP ON HIS CARDBOARD SIGN, A RATTY OLD BOOK BY HIS SIDE, A LITTLE PINK NOTE USED AS A BOOKMARK...
FRANKENSTEIN
I REACH FOR IT...
WHEN HIS EYES SNAP OPEN...
AND HE GRABS MY WRIST!
THAT'S MINE... SINNER!
I'M THE ONE, NOT YOU!
BLOOD PRESSURE BPM.
HUH?
WHY...

ONE WEEK LATER...
THIS IS IT...YOUR BIG DAY!
YOU EXCITED?
IT FEELS STRANGE, GOING HOME.
I'M SURE IT DOES, BUT YOU HAVE NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT. YOU'RE RESTED AND HEALTHY AND READY TO GO.
I KNOW THAT, BUT STILL...
JOSH, THE HOSPITAL WOULDN'T RELEASE YOU UNLESS WE WERE ABSOLUTELY SURE.
IT JUST SEEMS LIKE SOMETHING MUST HAVE HAPPENED, SOMETHING BAD, THAT PUSHED ME OVER THE EDGE...
...DROVE ME TO STOP EATING AND SLEEPING.
LOTS OF BRILLIANT PEOPLE LOSE THEMSELVES IN THEIR WORK. NOBODY CAN PUSH 22 HOUR DAYS AND BE HEALTHY, NOBODY.
BEING AFRAID TO GO HOME IS TOTALLY NORMAL.
I KNOW THAT, BUT...
HOW ABOUT THIS--I'LL STOP BY YOUR PLACE ON MY WAY HOME FROM WORK, JUST TO MAKE SURE YOU'RE SETTLING IN OKAY.
WOULD THAT MAKE THIS EASIER?
ABSOLUTELY!

4:30 PM

Before I knew it, I was finishing up an hour-long EXIT INTERVIEW with Dr Welder. He poked and prodded, checking for any last cracks in the plaster. Finding none, he congratulated me on my impressive recovery and assured me....



...I was gonna DO FABULOUS on the outside!

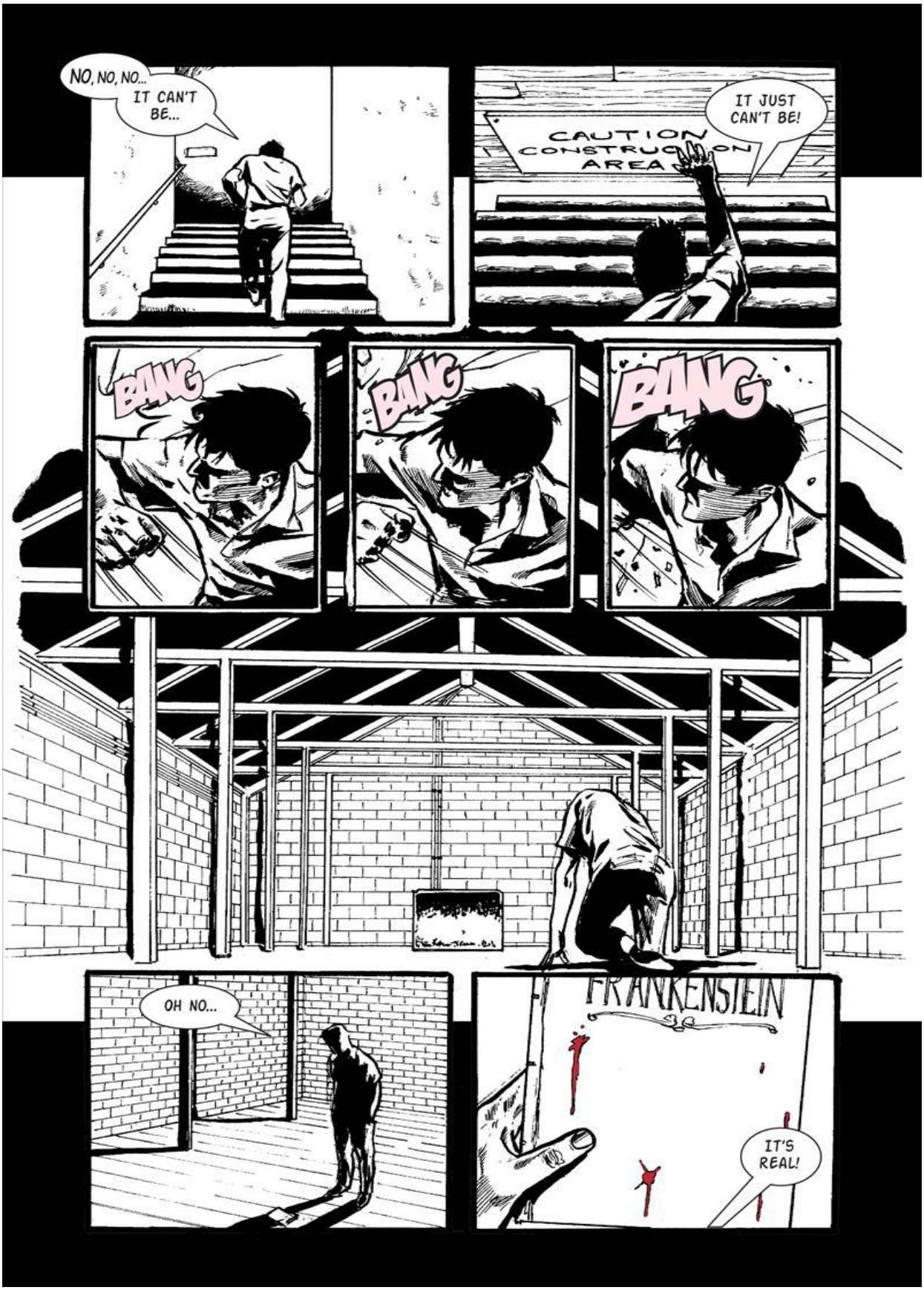
A FEW DEEP BREATHS OF FRESH AIR AND I WAS OFF, HEADING FOR HOME. THE CITY LOOKED JUST LIKE I REMEMBERED, ONLY CLEANER AND BRIGHTER AND FRIENDLIER...
AND BEST OF ALL, GWEN WOULD BE COMING OVER SOON!
I'M BACK...ALL BETTER!
MR. JOSHUA!
WE SO WORRY. YOU SCARE US BIG.
WELCOME HOME!
THANKS SO MUCH--FOR FINDING ME, FOR CALLING THE AMBULANCE. YOU GUYS SAVED MY LIFE.
IT NOTHING. WE JUST GLAD YOU BETTER.

YOU NEED TAKE BETTER CARE NOW. OPAL ALWAYS SAY--IT NO HEALTHY, WORK SO HARD. NO HEALTHY. YOU TAKE BETTER CARE.
I KNOW-- I WILL... I WILL...
AND, THANK YOU, REALLY...
THE SECOND FLOOR WAS JUST LIKE I REMEMBERED, WITH A FEW SLIGHT DIFFERENCES.
VERGE...
EMERGENCY EXIT
UTILITY CLOSET
UTILITY CLOSET
GWEN...

MY APARTMENT WAS JUST LIKE I REMEMBERED, TOO, ONLY A LOT MESSIER.
GWEN'S EXTRA KEY?
AND THERE WAS A DOOR THAT WASN'T THERE BEFORE.
THE LAB?
MY GOD... IT'S REAL.
YOU WROTE THE UNUM SYSTEM, FULL-SCALE...
TO SUPPORT MILLIONS OF USERS...BUT WHY?

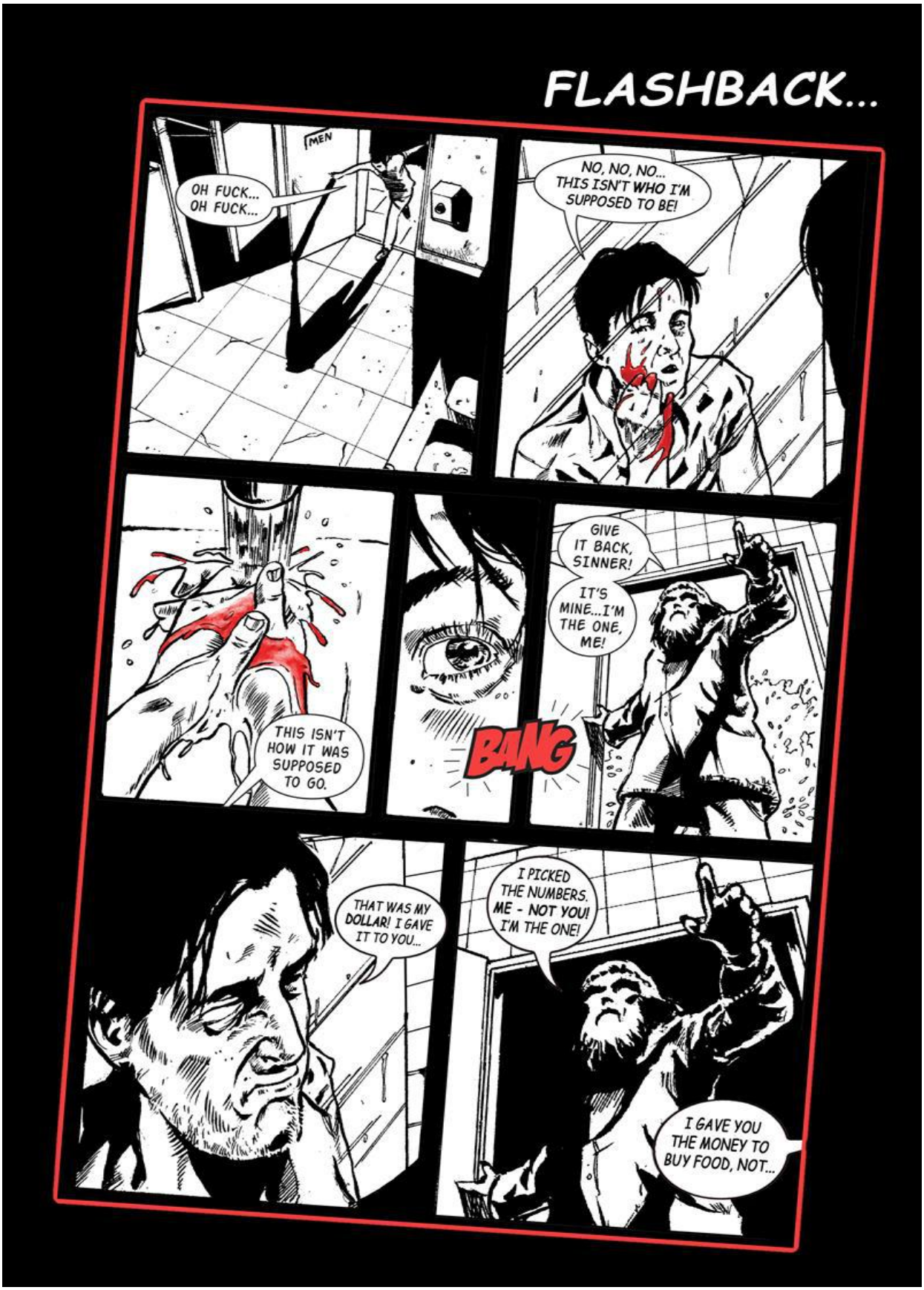
WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?
TO MAKE THIS WORK, REALLY WORK, ON A GLOBAL SCALE...
...WOULD TAKE MORE THAN A FEW SURPLUS COMPUTERS IN AN EXTRA BEDROOM.
IQ GRAPH
A LOT MORE.
WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING?
BUDGET REQUIRED $97 MILLION
PATHETIC...
BWIP
FLASH
38,796 USERS
0123456789

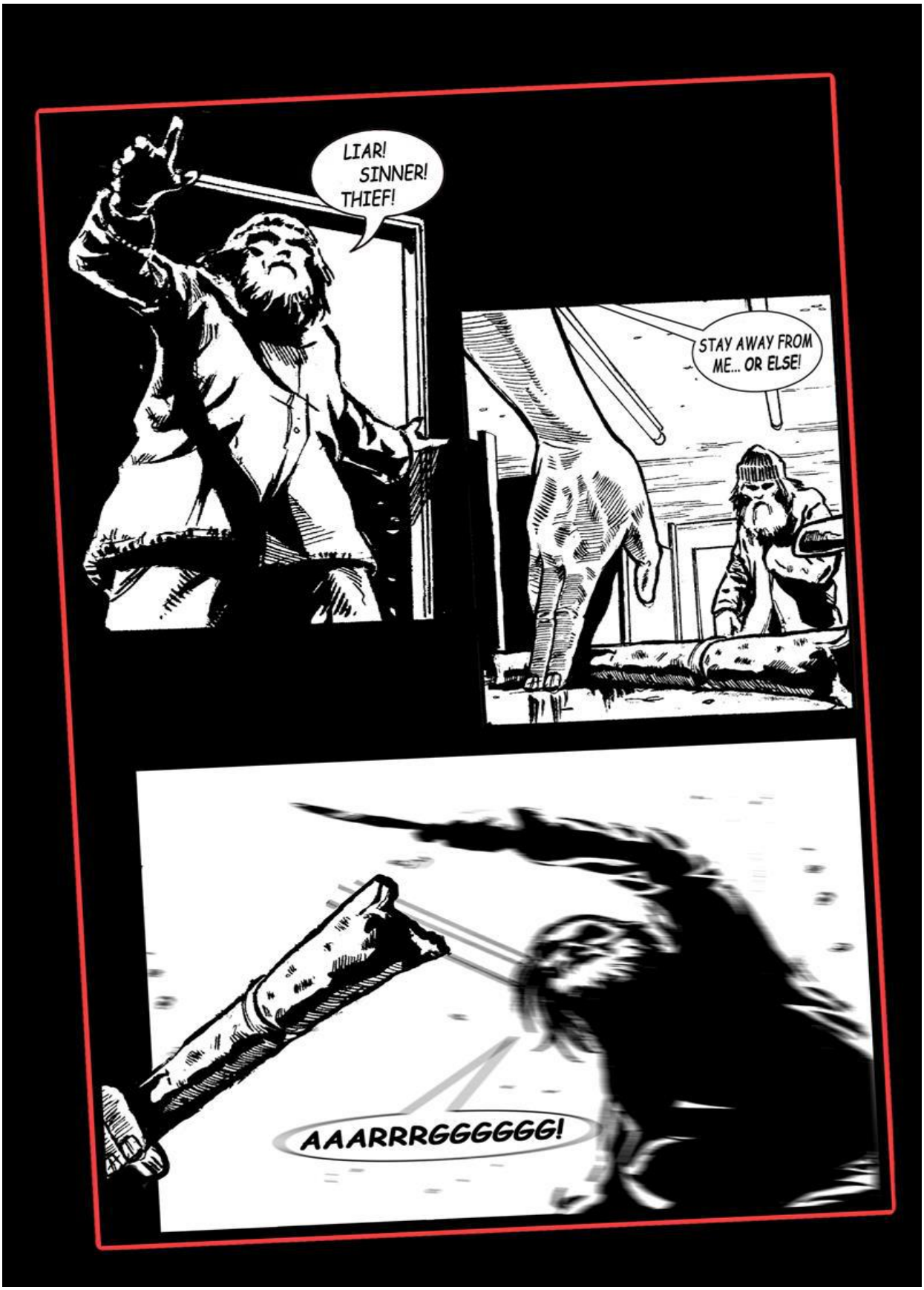
MEANWHILE, GWEN WAS FINISHING UP AT WORK.
GWEN HATHAWAY, PhD
SHE FLIPPED THROUGH SOME FILES, LOOKING FOR **SOMETHING**...
GENIUS OR MADMAN?
PROFESSOR DESTROYS LAB
ME, I WAS JUST CLEANING UP, NOT LOOKING FOR ANYTHING...
IT'S CRACKED?
WITH **GWEN** COMING OVER, I FIGURED I SHOULD REMOVE THE BROKEN GLASS. SO I **OPENED IT UP**...
THE UNITE
SINNER
WHAT THE HELL?
WHY WERE YOU FEELING SO GUILTY?
WE COULDN'T HAVE BUILT ***HIM*** FOR REAL, NOT WITHOUT A HUNDRED MILLION MORE OF...


NO, NO, NO...
IT CAN'T BE...
CAUTION
IT JUST CAN'T BE!
BANG
BANG
BANG
OH NO...
FRANKENSTEIN
IT'S REAL!

A FEW HOURS LATER...
JOSH? HELLO?
JOSH, ARE YOU UP HERE?
I'VE BEEN LOOKING ALL AROUND FOR--
IT'S JUST LIKE HE SAID...
SINNER
JOSH? JOSH! ARE YOU OKAY?

MY GOD, THAT'S REAL, TOO...
REACTION
CAN YOU HEAR ME? JOSHUA! JOSH!
I FOUND THE NUMBERS.
MY GREATNESS. MY MONA LISA. SHE CAN STILL BE MINE...
LOTTO
AND THERE IT WAS, THE LOTTERY TICKET WORTH $117 MILLION.
YOU DESERVE IT. YOU EARNED IT. AND, YOU'VE GOT NOTHING TO FEEL GUILTY ABOUT. NOTHING...
I KNOW...YOU TOLD ME.


FLASHBACK...
MEN
OH FUCK... OH FUCK...
NO, NO, NO... THIS ISN'T WHO I'M SUPPOSED TO BE!
THIS ISN'T HOW IT WAS SUPPOSED TO GO.
BANG
GIVE IT BACK, SINNER!
IT'S MINE...I'M THE ONE, ME!
THAT WAS MY DOLLAR! I GAVE IT TO YOU...
I PICKED THE NUMBERS. ME - NOT YOU! I'M THE ONE!
I GAVE YOU THE MONEY TO BUY FOOD, NOT...


LIAR!
SINNER!
THIEF!
STAY AWAY FROM ME... OR ELSE!
AAARRRGGGGGG!

JOSH, SOMETIMES BAD DREAMS ARE JUST BAD DREAMS...
GET UP, JOSHUA... YOU HAVE BIG THINGS TO DO, IMPORTANT THINGS THAT WILL CHANGE THE WHOLE WORLD.
YOU REALLY THINK?
I KNOW...

OF COURSE, GWEN WASN'T JUST DOING PAPERWORK BEFORE SHE HAD LEFT HER OFFICE...
GWEN HATHAWAY, PhD
QUESTION: WILL HE FIND IT?
ANSWER: YES GWEN, HE WILL.
AND THANKS...
FOR REBUILDING HIM, CORRECTLY.
HOMELESS MAN
BEATEN TO DEATH
NO SUSPECTS NO
GENIUS OR MADMAN?
Rakrowd/Potter Debrief Research Lab
SS MAN
TO DEATH
NO SUSPEC
MOT
SHE WAS CLEANING MY FILE OF THE ONE THING SHE DIDN'T WANT ANYONE TO KNOW, INCLUDING ME...
CRUNCH
HOMELE
BEATE
ACHIEVE YOUR GREATNESS, JOSHUA AND EVERYTHING WILL WILL WORK OUT AS IT SHOULD...

BUZZ-BUZZZ-BUZZZ
WHO?
SOMETIMES, I WONDER HOW I GOT HERE...
YOU BETTER GET CRANKING...
ME
NOT TO THIS PLACE, TO THIS PERSON.
DON'T FORGET YOUR MEDS...

And the COWARDLY MAN proclaimed, "OUR GREATNESS AWAITS! "

And THE MONSTER was pleased...

THE END

EPILOGUE:
A "MONKEY ROOM" is hereby defined as an emergent COLLABORATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS evoked from a large number of distributed users by means of a mediating software interface. The system is designed to collect real-time INPUT from millions, even billions, of simultaneous users, deriving a numerical amalgamation that is channeled into a singular OUTPUT of collective intent. The system employs weighting-factors known as Psychometric Variables to adjust the contributive impact each user has upon the "collective will" of the emergent consciousness. By closing the loop around STIMULUS and REACTION, users are drawn into a semi-hypnotic state that facilitates the
UNUM

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

LOUIS ROSENBERG *EARNED A PHD IN ROBOTICS AND VIRTUAL REALITY FROM STANFORD UNIVERSITY, DEVELOPING KEY METHODS FOR TRAINING SQUIRRELS TO SPY ON FOREIGN POWERS. HE'S RUMORED TO LIVE ON AN ABANDONED OIL-RIG OFF THE PACIFIC COAST, BECAUSE AS MOST PEOPLE KNOW, SQUIRRELS CAN'T SWIM. ROSENBERG WAS THE FOUNDER OF A FEW HIGH TECH COMPANIES -- IMMERSION CORP, OUTLAND RESEARCH & MICROSCRIBE LLC.*

ABOUT THE ARTIST...

GRAME HOWARD *IS A LONDON BASED ARTIST AND ILLUSTRATOR SPECIALIZING IN COMIC ART. HE SPENT TEN YEARS WORKING IN EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION FOR PUBLICATIONS INCLUDING THE GUARDIAN AND THE LONDON TIMES. HE HOLDS A DIPLOMA IN 3D ANIMATION, HAVING SPENT YEARS IN THE ANIMATION FIELD...*

OUTLAND

PICTURES

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